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Art against the Odds: Textile Art in Perspective

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Abstract:

Historical and cultural odds such as slave trade, human sacrifice, trial by ordeal, widowhood rites and 'trokosi' system retarded progress in Africa. Formal school education introduced by the colonialists became the preserve for males as a result of negative perception nurtured towards girl-child education in Africa. In Ghana, the artworks of the pioneers in the 1940s and succeeding generations of contemporary artists addressed themselves to promoting the sustainable customs, traditions and constructive evolving cultures as well as denouncing the obnoxious cultural practices in visual narratological format for a positive reorientation. Through narrative inquiry, this article examines the artworks of three sculptors namely Kofi Antubam, B. K. Dogbe and El Anatsui who are categorized as two different generations of contemporary sculptors (with the former as a pioneer and the last two in the current generation) in Ghana's art history; and examines how their visual narratives in sculptural art presentation contribute to the concretization of Ghana's dress styles and aspect of textile art. It concludes that in narrating cultural objections through sculptural art, the works of these sculptors serve as a repository for critical reflections on Ghana's past dress styles and textile art.

Keywords: Visual narratives, narratology, odds, girl-child education, dress styles

1. Introduction

Digging deeper into the historical trajectory of Gold Coast (colonial name of present day Ghana) uncovers lugubrious and painful realities. Ghana was one of the African countries plagued by the slave trade. It was estimated that the trade landed fifty million Africans into slavery (Nkrumah, 1961). The success of slave trade in Gold Coast was dependent on the tyrannical and gluttonous rule of the war-like Kings and chiefs of the then Gold Coast. Factually, most of them from the Akan states were beneficially engrossed in the trade (Government of Ghana portal, 2014). Their love for inter-ethnic and inter-state wars to demonstrate strength and superiority spiced up the atrocious human trade as lucrative business for wealth empowerment in acquiring arms and ballistics to the extent that the kings and chiefs who were ruling at the time nurtured unhappy sentiment about the anti-slavery campaign that erupted among the European buyers. Shumway (n.d., p.36) cites David, Robinson and Douglas (1979) report of the Asante King Osei-Bonsu who was believed to have lamented upon the abolition of the slave trade that: "The white men...do not understand my country, or they would not say the slave trade was bad. But if they think it bad now, why did they think it good before...? If the great king [of England] would like to restore this trade, it would be good for the white men and for me too..." Olaudah Equiano, an anti-slavery campaigner in 1789 had firmly established that "When a trader wants slaves, he applies to a chief for them, and tempts him with his wares." (Archive Education Service, 2007, p.6)

Many scholars have ascribed various reasons which in their views led to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Some say it was abolished on humanitarian grounds while others contend that the rebellion of enslaved populations in the Caribbean against their European masters undermined the plantation slavery and rendered the trade unprofitable (Maris-Wolf, 2009). But it is important to put on records that the Europeans abolished the slave trade due to the advent of the industrial revolution that brought increased unemployment, the quest to search for new raw materials and their appetite for chasing highly finished goods rendered the business unprofitable (Austen & Smith, n.d.; Government of Ghana portal, 2014). The insistent love for wars by some of the Akans, especially the then militant Asante ethnic state coerced the Fante led coastal states susceptible to the Asante warriors to voluntarily seek asylum under European wing. Capitalizing on the weakness of the Fante led coastal states, Lt. Commander W. H. Hill, the first appointed governor of the Gold Coast, made an agreement that spelt out conditions and responsibilities of those Fante ethnic states led by their chiefs to sign. This agreement was signed on 6th March 1844 and popularly named the Bond of 1844.

The bond cemented British power and jurisdiction over the coastal territories and stated the protection of people and property; abolition of human sacrifices, kidnapping of hostages, panyarring and other barbarous customs as first object of law. And that the serious crimes should be tried by the British judiciary representative officers in conjunction with the chiefs as custodians of the

customs of the community overridden by the principles of British law (Fordjour, 2014). It implied that the observance of indigenous customs and traditions by default should necessarily be compatible with the principles of the law of England (Bennion, 1962). And that was the beginning of Gold Coast's journey to colonial rule. The kings and chiefs might have appended their signatures or thumb-printed without paying critical attention to the implications and consequences of the contents of the Bond. Blaming the British-European for practicalizing the colonization agenda is unfortunate, for the Gold Coasters led by their chiefs and kings freely offered themselves for colonization instead of smoking the peace pipe and living as a united front. There is an Akan proverb which says, "If you play with the dog, its licks your mouth". That is the price to pay for asking a foreigner to protect you on your own land.

In my view, the colonialists dwelled on two major premises in testing the unitary pulse of the Gold Coasters before launching their colonization machinery – establishment of colonies. The unflinching leadership support and indulgence of the kings and chiefs in the slave trade to the extent of relinquishing their own people for sale portrayed them as uncaring and atrocious leaders who could be easily influenced. And their intermittent warring spirits exposed them as ethnic state with divisible tendencies. These variables provided ammunition for the gradual colonization of the entire ethnic states of Gold Coast. After gaining sovereignty over many coastal states, they increased their importation of Euro-Christian missionaries who in their soul-winning campaigns tagged the artistry of the people as idolatrous (Essel, 2014; Antubam, 1963). Ghana and other African countries were tagged as people without history. "The study of African social institutions and cultures was subordinated in varying degrees to the effort to maintain the apparatus of colonial power." "African music, dancing and sculpture were labelled "primitive art". They were studied in such a way as to reinforce the picture of African society as something grotesque, as a curious, mysterious human backwater, which helped to retard social progress in Africa and to prolong colonial domination over its peoples." Nkrumah (1963, p.2)

In the light of this unfortunate development, the early formal school education visual artists in the 1940s and the succeeding generations of artists gathered momentum to produce art that express Ghana's cultural values, beliefs, practices and other historical realities to demystify Ghanaian art as valid art beneficial to the societies that produced them. Their art showed cross-cultural artistic blend of Eurocentric "academic realism, proportions and perspectives with African ethnic art tradition of disproportions, stylizations and exaggerations" (Fosu, 2014, p.5; Fosu, n.d.) enveloped in cultural narratives. The artworks produced as in the case of the early contemporary African artists offered artistic commentary in visual modes which in the words of Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (n.d.) were to "mediate, comment on, examine real or imagined personal and collective, as well as the dialectical tensions between old and new cultural practices, between political systems and individual subjectivities." (p.30)

To examine the pros and cons of the Bond is not the priority of this article, however, a quick review of it will help in straightening up issues to generate better understanding of the genesis of contemporary Ghana visual narrative art culture. Danquah (1957) cites the historical account of Sarbah which confirms that the colonialists were guilty of cruelties and barbarities which they pretended to abolish in the name of protecting human lives and property. As a matter of fact, despite the splendour of Ghana's visual and material cultures, some of the customs and traditions were barbarous and deserved condemnation. These included widowhood rites, human sacrifices or ritual murders, 'Trokosi' system (enslaving a young girl yet to experience menarche to a deity for the atonement of the sins of a relative) and trial by ordeal.

Human sacrifices were practiced by many cultures in different parts of the world. There are biblical mythological evidences of human sacrifices (2Kings 3:27; 2Kings 21:6; 2Kings 23:20 – 25; Gen 22:1-24; Ezek 20:25 – 26; Num 31: 17 – 18; Ex 13: 2; Ex 22: 29; Lk 11:47-51; Jgd 11:29-40) that give hints about the practice in the time past. But this does not in, anyway, justify its continual practice as lawful by any society. Taking a cue from this, Ghana's contemporary artists presented their art in a narrative manner to preach against the cultural odds, promote the best sustainable customs and traditions as well as advocating for positivity in the evolving cultures including formal school education.

Examining their artistry brings to bare aspects of Ghana's dress cultural characteristics and how clothes are draped on the body for different occasions. This article purposefully features three sculptors namely Kofi Antubam, B. K. Dogbe and El Anatsui who could be categorized as two different generations of contemporary sculptors (with the former as a pioneer and the last two in the current generation) in Ghana's art history; and examines how their visual narratives in sculptural art format contribute to the concretization of Ghana's dress culture and aspects textile art.

2. Cultural Narrative Art in Ghana's Contemporary Art History

Narrative art has received myriad of definitions. It "tells a story, either as a moment in an ongoing story or as a sequence of events unfolding over time." (McNamara, Booth, Sridharan, Caffey, Grimm, & Bailey, n.d.). The use of cultural symbolisms, totemic objects and proverbs in weaving visual narrative art in Africa gives it an implied episodic interpretational connection between elements. Either in figural group or single composition, the ability of the artworks to unfold historical event(s) or era remains unsilenced. Captured in academic artistic language through their individualized artistic expressions of social realism, the art of the pioneers animated oral mythological history and actual events handed down by the Ghanaian ancestry and those contemporary cultures the artists themselves experienced. The artworks were "blended transcultural techniques and styles that produced fresh dynamic creations of representational and non-representational imageries." (Essel, 2014b) Often times they were composed in episodic compositional format in dramatizing the story they tell. Unlike the renaissance art which was dominated by biblical narratives, Ghana's pioneering artistic giants showcased the socio-cultural lifestyle of the indigenous people as in their gatherings and interactions with others in their respective communities. Animating oral history in art is a way of concretizing the stories for the benefit of posterity as well as documenting the indigenous cultures. Despite the divergent ethnic backgrounds of the foremost contemporary artists, a key feature of their works was

the nationalistic flavour and the unitary themes due to Nkrumah's preachment for oneness and H. V. Meyerowitz factor of reinvigorating Ghanaian African art traditions in Achimota School, togethertuned their minds towards national development.

Girl-child education perished at the very beginning of formal school education in Ghana. It was subdued by boy-child education. Traditionally, it is perceived that the kitchen is the 'office' for the girls since they grow up, get married and do all household chores for the general up keep of their respective families. As a result many parents considered spending their financial resources in the education of their girl-child only to end up getting married to man the homes of their husbands as an exercise in futility. They preferred to spend on their males who will become breadwinners of their future families. This prompted one of the famous Ghanaian scholars, Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey, to convince the Ghanaian society with his popular saying that "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation." Successive government tried to eradicate the negative perception about girl-child education. Kofi Antubam's (1922- 1964) mural was his way of lambasting this social canker to induce positive perception about girl-child education (Figure 1). Before executing this wooden mural, he had gathered famous reputation as Ghanaian nationalist state artist (Fosu, n.d.) and the foremost pioneering contemporary artist to introduce adinkra motif designs in his creations, a style which has continued to influence many Ghanaian artists (Essel & Opoku-Mensah, 2014).



Figure 1: Polyptych wooden mural.
1951? Wood. Children's Library, Accra
Photographed by authors

Giving his testament on the role of formal school education, and girl-child education in particular, in the development of the nation, Antubam's mural that stuck to the wall of the entrance to the Children's Library in Accra, is episodically peopled with six human figures, two males and four females, compactly engulfed by cooking utensils, hearth, percussion instrument and sizeable pots rendered in perspectival details (Figure 1). The topmost part of the mural depicts the *mate masie* adinkra motif design clasped by a young female figure and partially obscured by scarf headed woman in blouse and slit. This feminine figure by her costuming and placement in the composition assumes a figurative position of a mother holding two books – one opened and the other closed. She delivers one of the books to a young girl at the far left with her head turned to her direction and displaying her cordon bleu in an opened space that

could be described as kitchen. The figures wear long faces, heavily beaded eyes, full lips and robust musculature in dramatic actions accentuated by the Antubam's cubistic approach. At a casual look, the entire composition presents sophisticated complexity of figural arrangement engrossed in busy activities, nonetheless, it centres on dramatic narrative, movement, and exhibits knowledge of cooking utensils and costumes used at the time.

B. K. Dogbe's (b. 1944) *Trial By Ordeal* (plate 2) pays elegiac lamentation to the superstitious and dehumanizing act of accusing people of wrong doing by subjecting them to religio-magical ritualistic injurious trial such as dipping one's hand in a sizzling pool of oil, gripping a red-hot metallic object or intoxicating a poisonous concoction as a prove of innocence. It is believed that the culprit may be hurt or even die under this trial and the innocent unblemished. One's failure to kowtow and subject himself/herself to this trial made him/her guilty of the offence. With a firm grip of a vertically tilted bowl with the elongated hands towards the mouth of the seated and almost garmentless figure, Dogbe shows his sentimental repulsion towards the practice of trial by ordeal. The figure sculpted in cubistic orientation leans on its legs in a seated posture and appears to be intoxicating a substance. The support on which the figure rests has the *matie masie* motif design sunk in a repeated manner.



Figure 2: B. K. Dogbe. *Trial by Ordeal*. 1982. Wood (odum). 80cm high

Like Kofi Antubam, the father of contemporary Ghanaian sculpture, El Anatsui (b. 1944) also features Akan-Ghanaian adinkra motif designs in his sculptures in articulating his frequent philosophical visual statements, a practice which informed Fosu's (1993, p.197) thought that "one can detect Anatsui's anger with the general mess in Africa which has created conditions of insecurity and disorientation." El Anatsui has registered his hardwired distaste to slavery and colonialism through his sculptures often times in metaphoric forms of visual narratology. *Moon and Stars*, *Ancient Cloth Series*, *Unfolding Scroll of History*, *Mammoth Crowd*, *Iro and Buba*, *Leopards Pawprint* and *Nane* (Figure 3) far apart from their philosophical configurations and contextual values promulgate cross-cultural aesthetic responses. The techni-colour vibrancy, contrasting harmonies of formal visual elements, clever motif arrangements and stronger linearism seen in these works create passionate interest that prolong visual engagement of the works. As the viewer gets engrossed in looking at these works for total aesthetic comprehension of their narrative contents, the sequence of interlocked brilliant colour schemes and robust forms generate a broader picture mimetic of fabulous fabric designs despite their convincing three-dimensional quality. Fosu (2009, p.12) calls this effect 'textile sculpture'. He blended adinkra symbology with Nigerian Uli and Nsibidi whose effect yielded hieratic narrative in pejorative sculptural messaging plaguing Africa. For he has constantly maintained that modern art can claim no legitimacy if it is not rooted in one's cultural traditions "from which vantage it can then seek to appropriate suitable foreign ideas or techniques." (Okeke, 1995, p.58) He is noted for multi-cultured Afrocentric themes and trenchant distinction of style that manifests his highly technical sculptural miracles with non-conventional materials. He is one of the finest contemporary African international sculptors of our time.



Figure 3: *El Anatsui. Nane. 2006.*
Aluminium and copper wire. Source: *Fosu, 2009*

3. Dress styles in Ghanaian Narrative Art

Antubam's wooden mural (Figure 1), Dogbe's *Trial By Ordeal* (Figure 2) and Anatsui's *Nane* (Figure 3) focus on preaching against the cultural oddities that were and continue to plague the development of the African society. Conversely, by looking at the works afresh through the binoculars of dress fashion art, throws up a high conviction that the dress styles worn by Antubam and Dogbe's human figures have had influence on modern dress fashion design whilst Anatsui's *Nane* displays colour selection appetite of Africans in fabric design, choice and usage. In Antubam's work, the figurative mother and one of the young feminine figures wear blouse and slit but that of the latter show deep pleats due to her standing posture. Two of the remaining feminine figures are costumed in simple straight dresses that stretch beyond the knees. Blouse (locally called *kaba*) was introduced in around 1880 in the West and made it possible for the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothes for women. The religious activities of the missionaries facilitated the spread of *kaba* style and usage in Ghana. The Christian missionaries provided *kaba* and slit in plain cotton fabrics for some of the early new converts who also doubled as house helps for them. Over the years slit and *kaba* with headscarf are considered feminine. It is a popular trend in Ghana's dress fashion repertoire for more than a century and is still in use. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawling, a former first lady of Ghana became the beacon of new *kaba*, slit and styles headscarf throughout the 1990s. Fashion designers in Ghana produced new *kaba* styles, short and straight dresses with locally produced fabrics inspired by local design motifs.

The two male figures in Antubam's composition wear the *kɔla* style that is done by wrapping a sizeable piece of cloth in a horizontal position and draped around the body such that two ends cross each other in overlapping way and knotted at the nape, leaving the arms and the upper part of the back of the body uncovered. When knotted at the nape, the cloth drapes to create rhythmic accidental pleats as captured in Antubam's representation (Figure 4). At the infant stage of Ghana's formal educational system, most pupils wore this dress style to school. Out of this style many new feminine dress styles have been fashioned from this style that are also one-piece unstitched apparel wrapped, draped and secured on the body. Drudi (2007) presents exciting modern dress fashion design illustrations which in my opinion have historical and cultural linkage to the *kɔla* style (Figure 5). Incidentally, all her designs are unstitched one-piece apparel that are wrapped, draped and secured. Traditionally, servants of southern Ghana chiefs also dress in *kɔla* style during durbars. This style has influenced women's wear with varying dress styles.

A dress style portrayed by Dogbe in his work (Figure 6) is *amoasen* (covering the genitals) style which the females wore such that a strip of cloth secures the genital area with the support of beads or thread at the waistline. The strip of cloth interlaces the waist thread or bead at the front and passes in between the thighs to interlace at the back of the waist. Among the males, the loincloth (*danta*) produced from the bark of the *Antiaris Africana* tree (Kyenkyen) was gently wrapped around the genital and secured at the waist in a similar manner (Figure 7). It is a dress style that was common on the African continent for centuries long before colonization.



Figure 4: Details of Antubam’s mural depicting the kòla style that creates accidental pleats

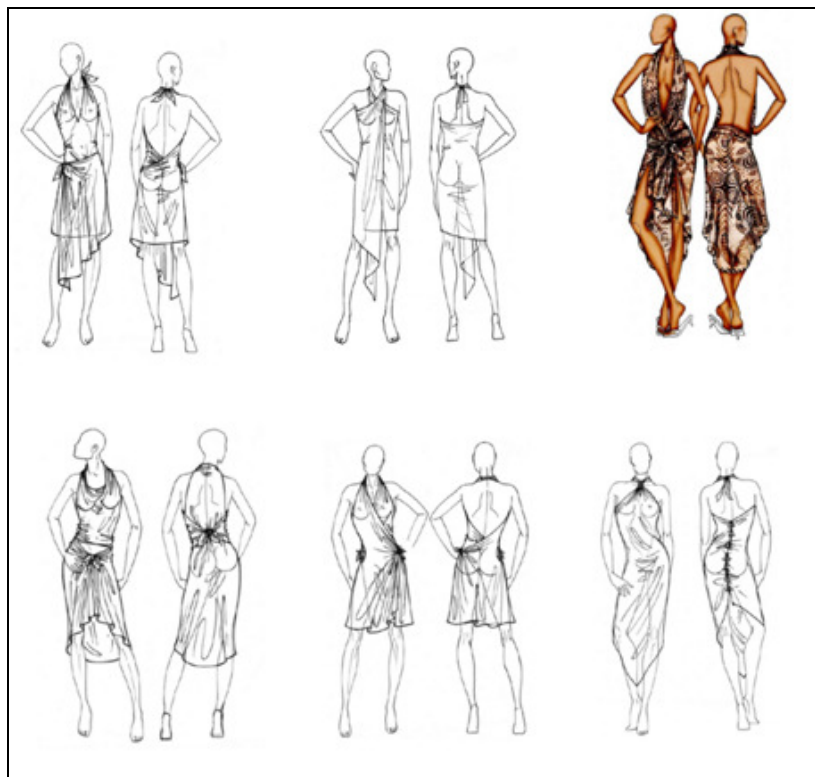


Figure 5: Samples of modern clothing styles inspired by the Ghanaian kòla style (from A to F) (Source: Drudi, 2007)



Figure 6: Details of Dogbe’s Trial by Ordeal depicting an idealize form of the Amosen style



Figure7: A male adult wearing the danta wrapped around the genitals. (From left to right: back view and three-quarter view).
(Source: Nana Kimati Dinizulu Archives, 2011).

This dress style was experienced in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Ghana. It was initially an outer garment but later become an inner garment. During President Nkrumah's 'national dress' campaign (Allman, 2004) it was one of the dress styles he sought to change as an outer garment. Comparing the design of the G-String and the *amoasen* style as reminisced in Dogbe's *Trial By Ordeal*, it is sound to admit that G-String, a nineteenth century underwear fashion design style takes its direct route from the *amoasen/danta* style. It covers the pubic area and is supported by a narrow cord between the buttocks and around the waist (Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, 2009). The narrow nature of the back design vanishes into the buttocks and exposing the buttocks entirely for a full all-round appreciation. When worn, its attractive look and directional lines makes it an erotic underwear fashion (Essel, 2013).

El Anatsui's elegance and finesse of handling discarded bottle tops of metallic constituents and copper wire in meshing them for the creation of "textile sculpture" assemblage and construction tells his passionate interest in converting the wastes to the status of incredible masterpieces. He does not waste the waste. Under his technical manipulation of these waste materials they migrate from their state of unbearable uselessness to fulgurant magnificence inescapable from the spectatorship of art lovers with high aesthetic taste. The weave structure of the interlaced fashioned bottle tops with the copper wire mediating for its stronger friendly bonding allows the work to adapt the draping behaviour of a typical hanged fabric. It is a make-believe textile fabric produced in metal weaving. The netted nature of this metal fabric and its ability to draw into flexible wealth of natural draperies cast sensational shadow in the fabric that projects its simulated flowing garment characteristics. There is glittering of harmonious colourful mosaic of dominating gold, brown and violet interwoven with red and black combinations mimetic of kente cloth colour schemes and African prints in general (Figure 3). Looking at the design again, Fosu (2009) suspects a derivative influence from the repertoire of West African colour symbolisms. Unravelling the historical realities of the work, Fosu (2009, p. 12) says it "seems to be a cynical historical recount of the manipulation of the 15th – 18th century liquor and textile inter trade activities that facilitated international slavery and global racism as well as the instigation of tribal wars and conflicts in West Africa." According to Binder (2011, p.34) Anatsui himself thought of the bottle tops as objects that "links between Africa and Europe" and reminds him of the use of foreign brewed alcohol as one of the barter trade commodities for African goods and its usage in fuelling trans-Atlantic slave trade. Establishing the historical connection between liquor bottle tops in making symbolic signification to slave trade in Africa tells how this and other works of El Anatsui, the Ghanaian expatriate artist sinks his works in narratological pathways. Another contribution of his textile sculpture is its ability to offer new design ideas in fabric designing involving the blending of tiny polymorphous shapes in polychromatic schemes. Inferences drawn from the three sculptures examined are that Antubam and Dogbe present the dress styles that were in vogue at the time. They include the blouse and slit combinations, straight dress, *Amoasen/danta* styles and *kola* styles. The *kola* style has inspired modern unstitched one-piece womenswear apparel that is wrapped, draped and secured. Anatsui's 'textile sculpture' offer inspiration for fabric designing through blending of tiny polymorphous shapes in polychromatic schemes, intelligent display of colour application skills in fabric designing, and creating interesting textures in fabrics for bonding of motifs.

4. Conclusions

Slave trade and several negative cultural practices such as human sacrifice, widowhood rites, trial by ordeal as well as resistance to evolving cultures including girl-child education have militated against the speedy development of Africa's Ghana. In the colonization attempt by the foreign intruders in Ghana, they pretentiously crafted an agreement which superficially abolished some of these negative cultural practices but surreptitiously harboured devilish sentiments of languishing the people into slavery in robbing them of their freedom. The agreement laid the foundation for the colonialism and fueled slave trade in Ghana. Additionally there were internal cultural oddities that hampered progressive development. The nation's earliest contemporary sculptors and their succeeding generations preached against these and other cultural practices and factors retarding progressive development through visual narratives. Antubam, Dogbe and Anatsui's artworks thrived on the same standpoint to induce cultural plural positivity. On the other hand, the sculptural expressions of their oeuvres present the realities of the dress styles that were in vogue at the time. These dress styles include the blouse and slit combinations, straight dress, *amoasen* and the *kola* styles. *Amoasen* style has strong influence in the

development of G-String while the *thekola* style has inspired unstitched one-piece apparel that is wrapped, draped and secured women wear. Dress has become a world culture where no one can boast of it as absolute owners, however, it is sound to conclude that Ghana's dress styles have contributed to world women wear designs. Anatusi's work blends the complementary colours in his textiles sculpture, a style that offers reflections for colour application in fabric design in the African context. In this article I have tackled it from the perspective that though these sculptors created their works with no deliberate intention of concretizing Ghana's dress styles and or aspects textiles art their sculptures examined in the study serve as record of dress practice at the time and also serve inspiration for textiles designing.

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