Man’s Cloth, c. 1920–70, made by the Ewe or Adangme culture, Ghana or Togo

Armlet, 1500s, made in the Benin Kingdom, Nigeria
At first the cloth appears to have a very regular pattern. But is it as regular as it first appears? Follow the lines of the weave structure.

The intricately carved armlet was made for an Oba (king) of the Benin Kingdom and is an incredible example of the skill of ivory carvers of the 1500s. It was one of a pair that would have been worn on special occasions. Decorated with a repeating pattern of men and animals, the armlet appears very regular. But is it as regular as it appears? Follow the pattern and look for places where the men, mudfish, and crocodiles are visible. In Benin, mudfish are a symbol of wealth and power and can be found decorating king’s crowns and royalty. The curved cylindrical shape of the armlet directs the viewer’s eye through the carving and lent itself perfectly to making a bracelet. The carvings are deliberately shallow in an effort to minimize waste of such a precious material.

A treasured material both in Africa and throughout Europe, Obas adorned great wealth trading ivory with Europeans. In the Benin Kingdom the power of the Oba was expressed through his absolute control of this highly-valued material. Benin artists carved ivory objects for sale to both Europeans and Africans alike. The ivory that remained in the kingdom was used in a number of different ways. Tables were carved with decorative patterns and placed on altars in the royal palace, or were cut down into smaller pieces to be made into jewelry and objects that were used in religious rituals.

The Benin Kingdom was a pre-colonial empire located in what is now southern Nigeria. The capitol city was Edo, called Benin City today. Though little is known about the origins of this powerful kingdom, much is known about the period of political consolidation, wealth, and expansion of the 1400s. During this time Edo was fortified with an impressive network of walls and moats, and military campaigns rapidly expanded the kingdom. Benin became highly organized and powerful, and was admired by both European travelers and neighboring African nations for its art. The kingdom’s wealth continued to grow through trade with the Portuguese and Dutch, common trade items included ivory and piper. Descendants of the Obas still occupy the throne in Benin City and serve an advisory role to the government to this day.

In the late 1800s, Great Britain attempted to convince the kingdom to sign a treaty that would have placed it under British rule. The Obas resisted signing such a treaty, and responded by capturing and killing eight British representatives. In 1897 the British retaliated with a devastating military raid known as the Benin Punitive Expedition, during which the entire city of Edo was razed and burned. Much of the kingdom’s treasured art was destroyed and over 2,000 works of art were taken by the British and sold in Europe at auction. Today these works are in museums and collections around the world.

About the Artwork

Ewe (gye)-woven cloths are typically worn for important events such as funerals, dances, weddings, and in celebration of newborns. Cloths like this one are handmade, labor intensive, and quite expensive. They serve as both status symbols and symbols of identity for wearers. When worn by men, the cloths are wrapped around the body and shaped down the shoulders, much like a toga, and fall evenly to the wearer’s ankles (see photo on the right). Women may wear the cloths in many different ways, wrapped under their arms leaving both shoulders bare, as a skirt over which a blousé is worn, as a wrap around their neck, or in the toga-like way that men do.

About the Ewe Weaving Tradition

While we do not know the identity of the person who made this cloth, there is much we know about the weaving tradition of the Ewe people. Colorful, geometrically patterned cloths like this one are most commonly known as kente (ken-tay) cloth. Produced by both the Ewe and Asante (ah-NASS-tay), these cloths are woven by men and women on special occasions. The Ewe people live in the present-day West African republics of Ghana, Togo, and Benin, and are well known throughout the region for the fine quality of their weavings. Men weave the cloths, while women spin and dye the cotton thread. Women are responsible for selling the cloths at market and often name them after the patterns and placed on altars in the royal palace, or were cut down into smaller pieces to

Look Closely

• How many differently patterned strips can you find in this cloth?
• Based on the width of the strips, can you tell where the weaver has chosen to use a tighter or looser weave structure?
• At first the cloth appears to have a very regular pattern. But is it as regular as it first appears? Follow the lines of the weave structure.

Look Again

• What words would you use to describe the colors and patterns of this cloth?
• Have you seen anything you would have to do when working with ivory that can’t be done when working with textiles, and vice versa?

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