Roots and Rituals: A Perspective on Dutch and African Surface Design

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ROOTS AND RITUALS:
A PERSPECTIVE ON DUTCH AND AFRICAN SURFACE DESIGN

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Going into this project, I knew I wanted to do two things: work with surface design on fabric, and explore the textiles in different countries. As I am nearly 75% Dutch, Holland was an obvious place to start. Shortly into my research, I discovered the company Vlisco: a textile manufacturing company based in Holland that produces African printed fabric. They use an imitation wax batik technique and create designs based on traditional African imagery and symbolism. Although it is hard to determine, the Dutch do not seem to have one particular style depicted in their textiles due to major outsourcing to other countries, but they do have a rich history of tile design. Seeing as both tiles and textiles are a form of surface design, I decided to compare and contrast these two things. I found that in the same way African symbolism often referenced back to every day, mundane tasks and objects, the Dutch depicted similar images in their own context. I thought my project would turn into a historical comparison of two very different geographical locations. Instead, it took an unexpected turn, as I realized the process of making in the styles of these cultures became so much more important to my work and to myself, as an artist.

I am very Dutch. My paternal grandmother came from Holland in her early twenties, and my maternal grandparents are not only part of the large Dutch-American-Reformed culture prevalent where I live, but are only a few generations removed from Holland. Never before had I focused on my heritage in my work. By doing so, I was intrigued by the combination of fiber processes with my ancestry through this project. There are so many stereotypes in Dutch imagery

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that I have grown up with, so it turned out to be fun working through and with some of these ideas in my pieces.

I also really enjoyed the African connection as my father spent several years working in South Africa post-college. Although this may be a far stretch to the Central and Western markets where the Vlisco fabric is sold, it added another personal element to the piece for me. Seeing the manifestation of the relationship of the two cultures inspired me to enter this same conversation in my own work.

The unifying factor for this project is the company Vlisco\(^2\): a luxury brand of European-produced African fabric. This Dutch-based manufacturer creates Indonesian-inspired printed fabric and sells it in Central and West Africa. Manufactured originally by the Haarlem Cotton Company (1875), this fabric has had an incredible international presence, and continues to in many art and fashion circles today. Many of the designs depict common everyday objects such as sneakers, combs, hair dryers, and even Michele Obama’s handbag\(^3\). Stock numbers designate the different designs until they reach the market where women name them after cultural events, proverbs, etc. (Image 1).


\(^3\) Vlisco: African Fashion on a Global Stage, 2016-17, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Historical Context

The Dutch were leaders in the trade industry and economy in Europe for many years due to their seafaring culture and the development of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century. Gaining a global presence, the Dutch became familiar with many different styles from around the world4. Following the defeat of Napoleon, the economy was in decline, so the Netherlands sought to rebuild it through growing their textile industry. In order to do so, companies like the Haarlem Cotton Company were established. Here the majority of the fabrics we now associate with Vlisco were produced—the name still appearing on the selvage of many Vlisco designs. The sale of European fabrics in West Africa goes back to the 1850's, as Vlisco archives find order forms dating back to August of 1852.

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The inspiration for starting these companies was to reproduce Indonesian batiks in a faster, more industrialized way. Wax batiks involve multiple reapplications of wax and dyeing between layers, causing it to be incredibly time consuming and labor intensive. Rather than drawing designs by hand, the Dutch created a system of rolling a resin resist onto the fabric with machines. This process enabled them to mass-produce bolts of fabric relatively quickly, rather than spend hours hand-drawing wax designs. The resin also allowed for easier clean up, as the wax in the batik method is often difficult to use and requires boiling the fabric to remove the wax from it. The resin roller process allows for the same type of resist patterns made by the wax that serve as borders for the colors printed on top of them. Each of the different designs go through different phases of printing as the different colors are laid down. As the layers are applied, the colors are built up and the patterns become more complex. This process enabled many different, complicated patterns to be designed and created easily.

Since there were so many types of fabric created for African cultures by the Dutch, I decided to look into surface designs that Dutch created to use themselves. Much work created in Holland is very narrative and minimally colored. Although there are some instances of Dutch textiles, their main mode of design and patterning is found on their iconic tiles (Image 2). Often using one to three colors, the tiles depict every day scenes such as fishermen, flowers, animals or every day activities. To my eye, these tiles appear to be the equivalent of the printed fabric of Africa. Seeing this connection, I looked for

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inspiration from other artists who also made visual connections between European and African cultures in their work.

Inspiration

The first artist I looked at was Yinka Shonibare, as his work directly comments on the conversation of the colonization of the global south. Shonibare has explored much of this connection and juxtaposition through the colonization of African countries in his art. His work depicts British colonial figures dressed in period garb, made out of brightly patterned African printed fabrics (Image 3). Shonibare's art is often politically charged and the use of the fabric helps to underline his intent. His use of Vlisco and other batik or imitation batik fabrics also directly relate to the inspiration for my work. Seeing the contrast of these brightly printed fabrics in conjunction with the traditional British fashion and
environment, engages the viewer in an interesting conversation. Although I did not want to create work with such strong commentary, I did feed off of the relationship between the art world and this manufacturing company.


In a similar usage of the materials, Vivienne Westwood, a fashion designer also utilized these Vlisco fabrics in some of her fashion lines. Known for her edgy designs through the 1970’s, Westwood has explored many different types of fashion and uncommon takes on style in her work. Her 1981 clothing line “Pirate,” uses the same type of brightly printed fabric in old British clothing styles as Shonibare (Image 4).^6

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^6 “Victoria and Albert Museum.” Victoria and Albert Museum, Digital Media Webmaster@vam.ac.uk. Accessed November 26, 2016. [http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/vivienne-westwood-designs/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/vivienne-westwood-designs/).
Westwood also worked directly with African artists for several of her other lines including her collection “Handmade with Love” that used recycled materials from Nairobi. She also is a partner with the Ethical Fashion Initiative that allows her to work with artisans from Burkina Faso who create woven pieces that she uses to build her other clothing lines.\(^7\) I found this to be another interesting example of this European-African relationship. Not only is this relationship cross-cultural, but it also links the handmade nature of using recycled materials to the

high fashion world. Bringing in artisans and using alternative materials adds to the idea of celebrating the mundane and use of the hand.

Although influences from the African side of this relationship are integral, so are Dutch influences. Piet Mondrian, a 20th Century Dutch painter, was the source of inspiration for the compositions in my first series. Mondrian's extensive use of the grid and primary colors serve as a base on which I built the compositions in my first series (Image 5). What I really love about Mondrian’s work is the stability and structure. Being a stereotypical Dutch trait, I found that this type of composition made a lot of sense to the work I was attempting. Placing organic designs created with different forms of resists in the context of a very structured grid added to my concept. Though not readily seen in my second series, the same concept of structure is present as each shape is consciously placed within the seeming chaos presented.

Similarly, Marian Bijlenga is a contemporary fiber artist whose work directly inspired my second series\(^8\). Her wonderful use of organic forms and ethereal-feeling materials are what I wanted to show in my piece (Image 6). Staying true to the idea that Dutch people rely on structure, her work demonstrates the ability to have an organic flow while still maintaining order and avoiding chaos. Her sensibility to the materials she uses is evident in her work and something I hoped to portray in my pieces as well.


My Work and Processes Used

Taking what I learned through my research of Vlisco, and looking at what other artists have done in the past, I began creating my work. Although I enjoyed the appearance and meanings behind many of the different prints, I not only didn’t have the means to mass-produce fabric in this way, but I also realized that I was more interested in the labor aspect celebrated in both cultures’ surface designs. Since hard work was celebrated in their motifs, I wanted to bring that hand-made labor and process into my pieces. I attempted to try out some of the techniques and breach the gap between these two cultures and visually different types of work. Using cotton as the main material for my first series I found this material translated well to the Dutch tiles as the cotton was a strong connection between the two cultures.

First, I looked into ways that different African countries and tribes designed their fabric. Resist dyeing through wrapping and sewing the fabric before immersion dyeing is a popular technique in Nigeria. This process is called “Adire”. Using indigo as a main dye, Nigerian artisans create beautiful textiles full of texture and depth. The process includes taking bits of fabric and tightly wrapping either raffia or thread around that bit of fabric and then securing it (Image 7). This allows the raffia to serve as a barrier between the fabric and the dye. Another version uses stitching, where each individual stich acts as a resist if pulled tightly enough. Once the stitching has all been done on the fabric, the piece is placed in a vast of dye. After the dye bath is complete, the piece is

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rinsed of any excess dye and then each stitch needs to be taken out to see the design underneath. Due to factors such as the tightness of wrapping or stitching—or lack thereof—it is impossible to know exactly how each piece will turn out until after it has been dyed and the stitches removed. This aspect of the process brings a surprise element similar to that of unwrapping a present on Christmas morning—you can never be sure what you are going to get! I found this part of the process wonderful and another example of the mark of the hand, as it clearly was not made by a machine.

Similarly, the next process I explored was using corn dextrin as a painted resist. This method allowed me to work more directly with imagery and gave a similar approach to the resin-resist technique used by Vlisco. This process involved painting the glue-like substance onto stretched fabric, allowing it to dry before painting on the fabric within those designated lines (Image 8). The corn dextrin also demonstrated the mark of the hand, as it could be just as
unpredictable as the Adire. Even in areas that appeared to have enough dextrin, the dye would sometimes bleed through (Image 9). Although initially frustrating, I later found the same appreciation for these surprise elements. Looking at Dutch tiles, I found similar instances of bleeding lines in the different images.

A third process that I used was embroidery or hand stitching. After spending hours stitching the Adire pieces, it made sense to continue this process in an additive method. Where the stitches were subtractive in the Adire process, the hand stitching added another visual element to the pieces. This gave each piece more depth and dimension as well as brought connections across the different elements in the pieces (Image 10).
Very similar to the corn dextrin resist method, the last technique I used was a silk gutta resist. This substance is drawn onto the fabric to create borders for the dye. The gutta is squeezed out of a bottle through a needle-like tip, which allows for more detail and accuracy (Image 11). Although this process allowed for more precise drawing, there is still plenty of room for surprises. Sometimes the resist does not soak all the way through the silk, or there is a break in the line, allowing the dye to bleed out onto the rest of the fabric. In the same way as the corn dextrin, I learned to make peace with and celebrate these unexpected instances. There is still so much beauty in this process, even with the uneven lines or run away bits of dye.
The compositions of the pieces in the first series are derived from Piet Mondrian, whose work with variations of the grid and creating different structured compositions made sense with the concept of piecing together these two differing cultures. The colors I pulled from Dutch and African artifacts relate well to the colors found in Mondrian’s work as well.

My show consists of two series of fabric panels—the first series appearing as quilts, the second as a silk triptych. While quilt-like panels are a direct response to the exploration of different processes, the second series morphs what I learned throughout the year with my own personal style. The first piece in the first series is a Mondrian-style composition of different forms of the Adire resists technique (Image 12). This piece explores one technique from Africa, paired with embroidery to emphasize different patterns and motifs found in this type of surface design. Although the embroidery can be linked to Dutch work, it also relates well to the handmade feel of the African style resist pieces. The second piece takes the form of grouted Dutch tiles (Image 13). This grid is less
complex than the first piece, emphasizing the order, simplicity, and line oriented nature of the Dutch tiles. The limited color palette is also reminiscent of the range of colors seen in many Dutch tiles. Using the same type of border and embroidery—as well as the small use of some African resist pieces—links the two pieces in the series.

The third panel attempts to literally piece the two of these prior panels together. The mixture of tile-like motifs and the African resist pieces creates a more blatant conversation. The patterns in the Dutch and African pieces attempt to line up and continue one another. The use of embroidery stitches the motifs together, causing the viewers eye to make even more connections than are already physically present (Image 14).
My second series is my own take on a contemporary interpretation of textiles from the same cultures (Image 15). Appropriating anamorphic forms seen in different work and combining them with bright colors also seen in contemporary textile work, the conversation continues. Staying with the same general, primary color palette, the two series link together. I decided to use different processes for this series as I felt the precious ones had been exhausted in my first series. Instead, I opted to focus on a comprehensive surface design attempt rather than piece smaller ones together. I did not want to completely lose the hand-stitched elements from the first series in my second, so I added appliqued bits of dyed organza into my design. Changing my material to china silk, the mood of the second series—or triptych—is a lot lighter and effervescent. Taking what I have learned about surface design and different techniques, I attempted to create something in my own style while acknowledging the cultural
context of my first series. The gutta resist in some ways imitates the lines seen on the printed Vlisco fabrics with the off-set outlines. The forms may be interpreted as animal print, which although not specifically the intention of the pattern, continues the idea of having animals and every day happenings printed on fabrics. The composition is an attempt at a controlled chaos. Although it appears that the different shapes are being blown across the panels, there is a clear directional force and path they are following.

Image 15. Series 2: Contemporary Synthesis

This project brought with it a lot of hard work as the processes used were labor-intensive and time-consuming. Without the hours of time and labor poured into these pieces though, I don’t think I would have felt as connected or passionate about the work I was creating. Just like the handcrafted imagery that I
was interested in visually, the process of making became just as integral to the work as the outcome itself. This being said, there are several things that could have made this show more successful.

Although this entire project evolved and grew out of intuitive processes, there could have been a stronger connection between the two pieces. Both the materials and compositions hold very different weights—both physically and visually—creating a dissonance between the two series. Individually, the pieces each had their own elements that may have been better crafted both in surface design and construction. Although the mark of the hand is important, craft is equally imperative in art. There are definitely instances where, if I were to create this show over again, I would take my time and experience with these processes to produce better quality pieces.

I only scratched the surface of both the connection between Holland and Africa, as well as the processes I used, but being able to incorporate my heritage into my work awhile exploring one of my favorite mediums was incredibly rewarding. Although there are always improvements to be made, I am content with the outcome of this project and plan on using what I have learned through this process in the rest of my work.
Image 16. At show’s opening November 30, 2016
A Selected Bibliography


*Vlisco*: *African Fashion on a Global Stage*, 2016-17, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
