A Text-Book Textile at the Pitt Rivers Museum

Historiographical Notes on a Kongo Cushion-Cover, its Canonical Status, Dating, and Provenance

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Since the mid 1990s, the Kongo cushion-cover that is the subject of this article (Figs. 1–2) has been exhibited and published a number of times (detailed below)—and, as I write, other loans and publications (including this one) are in train. As a result, it is now a well-known, indeed canonical work of not only Kongo, but also African, Atlantic, and World art. Having been responsible for its curation at the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum for the past twenty years, and thus being at least partly responsible for its recent busy “career” and “canonization,” I have long felt under an obligation to publish a detailed account of it and its history. To that end, as opportunities have arisen over the past two decades I have corresponded with interested scholars, arranged for materials identification and radiocarbon dating, and endeavoured to ensure that the relevant entry in the museum’s database and the paperwork in the object’s “related document file” are as comprehensive and up-to-date as possible.1 Database entries and paper files are not always reader-friendly, however, often needing interpretation and exegesis; hence this article.

I do not have the expertise to provide a complete account of Kongo cushion-covers in their full art-historical and cultural context. Rather, what I offer here is intended as a user-friendly account of everything that can be said with certainty—or a reasonable degree of assurance—about this particular cushion-cover and its history. No doubt some previously unknown but crucial piece of evidence will emerge as soon as I have submitted the final version, but that is in the nature of historical, object-focused research of this sort. Having survived for what we now know to be almost 600 years, and having had a busy time in the last twenty, this extraordinary work is set to continue to have a rich and varied life. This article is a summary of what is known about its career to date.

Kongo

Rather than attempt to review here the extensive literature on early Kongo art history, it is simpler to point to and draw on Ezio Bassani’s detailed discussion in “Appendix III: Kongo Art” in his survey of African Art and Artefacts in European Collections, 1400–1800 (Bassani 2000:277–84). Drawing on his own and other scholars’ assiduous research into the surviving accounts of early traders, explorers, and missionaries, as well as his survey of extant museum holdings, Bassani provides a comprehensive account of what is known about the ivory oliphants, raffia textiles, hats, and containers that were exported from the Kongo kingdom to Europe from the late fifteenth century onwards. In particular, he discusses and quotes from early reports on the techniques used to make textiles, their role in Kongo society, and their appreciation by Europeans.

The first contact between Europeans and Bantu-speaking Kongo peoples around the mouth of the Congo River was in 1482. At that time, the Kongo kingdom was one of the greatest in Central Africa, with an overall area of some 100,000 square miles comprising many provinces with a capital that had a population estimated at around 100,000. The production of raffia textiles seems to have been well established before the arrival of Europeans, for they are mentioned in many of the earliest European accounts of the Kongo nobility and their courts.

For many years it was thought that the raised patterns on these cloths were produced by a technique of “cut-pile” embroidery similar to that used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the peoples of the Kuba kingdom, some 700 miles to the north-east, to make the so-called Kasai-velvets. Closer examination, however, has revealed that the patterns on Kongo cloths were produced by a weaving technique; that is, weft floats were used to create geometrical patterns, generally lozenges...
1–2  Cushion-cover, front (above) and back (below)
Kongo; Congo/Angola; made by 1436
Raffia, pigment; 47 cm x 24 cm
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; 1886.1.254.1
Photo: Malcolm Osman, © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (photo reference 0001427575546 above, 0001427585546 below)
and zigzag lines. When only one color was used, the result was similar to European damask, but in some cases the pattern was emphasized by the use of a contrasting color for the supplementary weft. The weft floats were then cut and the ends of the thread rubbed so as to create the pile effect.

Although woven cut-pile and embroidered cut-pile cloths may look similar, the design of a cut-pile weave is limited by the necessity of repeating simple patterns, whereas the design of an embroidered cut-pile cloth is freer and may, as in some Kuba cloths, consist of what may seem like randomly organized motifs (Fig. 3). Clearly, the similarities in the general style of the two traditions suggest historical links, but the actual art-historical relationship between Kongo and Kuba cloths has yet to be established. That the techniques used are in fact different makes the establishment of such links more difficult than it has sometimes seemed.

This particular cloth is unusual in that not all the weft floats are cut, resulting in a combination of damask-like areas and areas of cut-pile tufts. Because weft floats reflect light and cut tufts absorb it, this also results in variations in the basic tan color. In this cloth, greater emphasis has been created in the lozenges and in the outlining of the interlacing designs by painting some of the tufts with an unidentified black pigment. This use of an additional color makes the Pitt Rivers Museum piece virtually

3 Textile
Kuba; Democratic Republic of Congo; made by 1909
Raffia; 112 cm x 46 cm
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; 1998.26.4
Photo: Malcolm Osman; © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (photo reference 000068340)

This is one of a number of Kuba textiles that were collected by Wilfred Gilbert Thesiger (1871–1920) when he was His British Majesty’s Consul in Congo, stationed in Boma, in 1907–1909. It was donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum by his son, the explorer Wilfred Patrick Thesiger (1910–2003), in 1998 (see Coote 2010: 122).

Photo: © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

What appears to be a cushion-cover similar to the example discussed here can be seen on the seat of the throne, the front of which also appears to be covered with textile.
unique; other Kongo cloths are monochrome, most of them a light tan. The name of the pattern is unknown, as is any meaning or significance it may have had. As the indigenous weaving industry died out after the establishment of European contact, it is only the motifs used that link this early Kongo art with the bodily and sculptural arts that are so well known from nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts and collections.

The design is the same on both sides, though the fact that they do not match at the edges suggests it was made from two pieces (probably two parts of one larger cloth), rather than from folding a single cloth. The decorative edging of small but densely packed balls, as well as the four large balls at the corners, are a common feature of Congo textiles. Raffia cloths and mats formed part of the accoutrements of the Kongo nobility. The form of this and similar cloths suggests that they were cushions, though surviving textual and visual evidence is sparse. A late seventeenth-century illustration seems to show a broadly similar cushion on the king’s throne (Fig. 4), but—as Adam Jones amongst others has warned us (see, for example, Jones 1994)—such European imagery must be treated with caution.

In a previous account, Hilde van Braeckel and I drew on an aside in John Thornton’s essay on “The Regalia of the Kingdom of Kongo, 1491–1895” (Thornton 1992) to suggest that “a possible (or alternative?) role as a bag or purse is suggested by the small opening at one end and by the fact that the Kongo king is said to have had a cushion in which to keep his jewels” (Coote and van Braeckel 1995). Drawing on a manuscript account by Mateus Cardoso, a Jesuit priest who was resident in the Kongo capital at the time, Thornton relates how, in a procession following the death of King Alvaro III in May 1622, one of the court functionaries carried “the cushion into which the king placed his jewels” (Thornton 1992:57). Cardoso’s manuscript account survives in the Jesuit archives in Rome, but Thornton refers to the published transcription in António Brásio’s Monumenta Missionaria Africana, in which Cardoso writes “a almofada em que o Rei poem os joelhos na igreia” (Cardoso 1988:485). Rather than this referring to a “cushion into which the king placed his jewels,” however, this actually translates as “the cushion on which the king kneels in church.” Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing what sort of a cushion Cardoso is referring to; it could have been something like the object discussed here, but could equally well be a European cushion.

Leaving aside any further discussion of technique, meaning, and use, in what follows I review what is known of the cushion-cover’s history, including the previously unpublished results of radiocarbon dating, as well as its recent entry into the canon of Kongo, African, Atlantic, and World art. The history of this particular cushion-cover can best be presented in three phases, which I characterize, in chronological order, as speculative, precanonical, and canonical. Given that so little is known about the first phase of the cushion-cover’s history, and what we can say depends very much on what has been learned during the precanonical and canonical phases, I take the precanonical and canonical phases first and the speculative phase last.

**PREcanonical PHASE**

Indisputable, documented knowledge about the cushion-cover begins as late as the 1880s, when an entry for it was composed by Edward Evans, underkeeper at the University of Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, who was given the task of cataloguing the museum’s “anthropological” collections in preparation for their transfer to join the newly arrived Pitt Rivers Collection at the University Museum. Drawing on the inventories, notes, and labels of his predecessor as Ashmolean underkeeper George Augustus Rowell, as well as his own research, Evans compiled a set of extraordinarily detailed catalogue entries, preserved in two volumes held at the University’s Pitt Rivers Museum. His remarkably detailed and accurate descriptive entry for the cushion-cover is as follows:

A bag, or cushion cover? of exceedingly fine woven grass in a kind of raised pattern much resembling plush, the colours being different shades of brown, the pattern being in lozenges and formed by the ends of the material projecting upright and cut very close. There is a border of little knobs all round the edge and four larger ones at the corners made in the same manner. Both the outer sides have the same pattern, but the inside is plain light brown. Locality uncertain but probably Eastern. Length 18 5/10 inches; Width 9 5/10 inches. Old Ashmolean Collection. Perhaps Tradescants. From the storerooms in the Old Clarendon building, 1883.

Cushion-cover
Kongo; Congo/Angola; made by 1436
Raffia, pigment; 47 cm x 24 cm
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford;
1886.1.254.1
Photo: Kenneth Walters, © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (photo reference 000079906)

This appears to be the first image of the cushion-cover, taken by a member of the Museum’s staff in September 1957.

5 Cushion-cover
Kongo; Congo/Angola; made by 1436
Raffia, pigment; 47 cm x 24 cm
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford;
1886.1.254.1
Photo: Kenneth Walters, © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford (photo reference 000079906)
It is not clear what Evans intended by his use of the phrase “Old Ashmolean Collection,” other than that he thought the cushion-cover had been part of the museum’s holdings for quite some time, but we may note here that he also speculated that the object may be part of the Tradescant collection, a suggested provenance to which I return below. He also tells us that the cushion-cover was found in 1883 in the Clarendon Building, another University property a few yards to the east, rooms of which had been used to store parts of the Ashmolean’s collections for some years. From this we know that it was not on display at the Ashmolean Museum at the time and that Evans’s entry was compiled in 1883 at the earliest.

We know from a later annotation in Evans’s catalogue that the cushion-cover was transferred from the Ashmolean to the University Museum on December 1, 1886, where it was incorporated into the newly arrived Pitt Rivers Collection (see Petch 2007:104). There are no surviving records to tell us whether it was put on display, or what information may have been provided for the visitor if it was. Indeed, the next moment in its recorded history is not until July 1922 when, according to a pencil annotation in Evans’s catalogue, Melville William Hilton-Simpson (mis)identified it as a “Bushongo chief’s cloth.” It was presumably at the same time that the words “A bag or cushion cover?” and “woven grass” were struck through, also in pencil. Traveller and ethnologist Hilton-Simpson had accompanied Emil Torday on his famous expedition to the Kasai Basin (Hilton-Simpson 1911) and, unsurprisingly given the state of knowledge at the time, drew on his familiarity with “Kasai velvets” to provenance the cushion-cover as Bushongo, that is Kuba, work. It is worth noting in passing Hilton-Simpson’s apparent rejection of Evans’s identification of the object as a woven cushion-cover; that is, Hilton-Simpson drew on his “field experience” to mistakenly reject Evans’s clear identification of the manufacture and purpose of the object based on his close observation.

Hilton-Simpson’s (mis)identification was followed by Pitt Rivers Museum curator Thomas Kenneth Penniman in 1944, when
he produced a brief-entry version of Evans’s catalogue to serve as a retrospective accessions register for the material that had been transferred from the Ashmolean to the Pitt Rivers in the 1880s, though he also copied across Evans’s tentative provenancing of the cushion-cover to the Tradescant collection: “AFRICA, CONGO, BUSHONGO. Chief’s cloth of fine woven grass in shades of brown, patterned in lozenges, fringed. ? Tradescant coll.” A Bushongo origin remained unchallenged until William Fagg of the British Museum suggested a Kongo origin. An undated and unsigned pencil note in the accession book compiled by Penniman reads: “W.B. Fagg, British Museum, thinks this is not BUSHONGO, but typical work from the old KINGDOM OF CONGO.” It seems likely that Fagg examined the cushion-cover on a visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum while carrying out the research that led to his Afro-Portuguese Ivories (see Fagg 1959). This was probably some time before September 1957, when the cushion-cover was first photographed by the Museum (Figs. 5–6), presumably at the request of Margaret Trowell, who published a detailed image in her African Design (Trowell 1960:plate xix) (Fig. 7) with a caption that draws on Fagg’s suggested provenance:

Detail of pile cloth. Probably the old kingdom of Congo. Lower Congo. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.—The darker parts of this design are formed by embroidering the areas with finely shredded, dyed raffia, every stitch of which is cut off close to the surface giving a texture like pile velvet. In the lighter spaces in-between the pattern is made by diaper weaving in natural coloured raffia. This cloth was collected before 1883, and is thought to have formed part of the Tradescant collection, acquired in the seventeenth century. The cushion-cover is signed “Central Belgian Congo. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.” In this cloth, collected about 1950, the pile areas are made in the same way as in top left, while parts in between are embroidered with fine rows of raffia. This phase of the object’s history culminated in 1983 in its listing in Tradescant’s Rarities, the first modern attempt to provide an account of the Tradescant collection and the present whereabouts of any surviving objects. Following Evans’s lead, which had also been followed—at least tentatively—by Penniman and Trowell, the Pitt Rivers Museum’s then assistant curator Lynne
Williamson included the cushion-cover in her list of "Ethnological Specimens in the Pitt Rivers Museum Attributed to the Tradescant Collection":

finely woven bag or cushion cover: this has been identified as a chief’s cloth from the Old Kingdom of the Congo. The technique of manufacture is cut-pile embroidery on plain-weave raffia cloth with an embroidery design taking the form of interlocking lozenges. The distribution of this special type of cloth near the mouth of the Congo River in the early eighteenth century increases the possibility that contact and trade with Europeans did occur as early as Tradescant’s time (Williamson 1983:339–40, cat. no. 359).

Although there was clearly still a good deal of misunderstanding concerning the techniques involved in producing such cloth and about what was already known about the history of Kongo-European “contact,” it had at least been established that the cushion-cover was Kongo work. As for the Tradescant provenance, we shall return to this below. Unfortunately, the cushion-cover was not illustrated in Tradescant’s Rarities.

**CANONIZATION**

By the early 1990s, then, an assiduous scholar could be expected to know that there was a Kongo textile in the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum. However, only one small black-and-white image of a small part of it had been published, and there had yet to be published an accurate account of the techniques used to make it.

When I joined the staff of the museum in March 1994, I was already aware of the existence of the cushion-cover, having come across Trowell’s account of it in her African Design. Moreover, my
The cushion-cover can just be made out on display on the flat in a long desk-case just to the right of center on the second floor.

interest in Congo textiles and culture in general had been stimulated, like so many other people’s, by the exhibition “Images of Africa: Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo, 1900–1909” at the Museum of Mankind in London in 1990–1992. Thus, when the opportunity arose to mount a small exhibition of historic and contemporary Kuba textiles at the Pitt Rivers Museum in early 1995, it seemed to me to be too good an opportunity to miss. Along with eight historic Kuba cloths from the museum’s collection and some twenty modern Kuba pieces from a private collection, the Kongo cushion-cover was displayed (Fig. 8) in its own desk-case with the following text: “Zaire, Kongo. Embroidered raffia cloth (stool cover?). Seventeenth-century? Probably one of the earliest Equatorial African textiles to arrive in Europe. Transferred from the Ashmolean Museum. (1886.1254.1).”

The cushion-cover attracted a good deal of attention during the time it was on display. In particular, it attracted the attention of art publisher Hansjörg Mayer, who in turn brought it to the attention of artist and Royal Academician Tom Phillips, who had taken on the task of curating the Royal Academy’s blockbuster exhibition “Africa: The Art of a Continent.” I had already given Phillips a tour of the Pitt Rivers Museum, as a result of which a Sapi figure group (1934.24.2) and an engraved San (Bushman) ostrich egg (2004.142.1110) had been selected and requested for loan. At Mayer’s prompting, Phillips added the cushion-cover to the Royal Academy’s request. The cushion-cover was thus included in the exhibition in 1995–96 (Fig. 9) and published in color in the accompanying catalogue (Coote and Van Braeckel 1995), in the subsequent installation of the exhibition in Berlin in 1996 (see Coote and Van Braeckel 1996a), and in the version of it shown at the Guggenheim in New York (Fig. 10) later the same year (see Coote and Van Braeckel 1996b).
With its appearance in all three incarnations of "Africa: The Art of a Continent," the cushion-cover was set fair to become—if it was not already—a canonical work. Three years later, in 1999, it joined a select group of objects from sub-Saharan Africa to be illustrated in the fifth edition of Hugh Honour and John Fleming's A World History of Art (1999:525, fig. 12.20), which features on many undergraduate reading lists. A decade later it was added to the discussion of "Art of Ancient Africa" in the third edition of Marilyn Stokstad's college textbook Art History (2008:437, fig. 13.16). In the meantime, it had been included in Monica Blackmun Visonè et al.'s comprehensive, single-volume art-history textbook A History of Art in Africa (2001:167, fig. 11.3). In 2007 it had been loaned to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, for temporary display in its new gallery "Atlantic Worlds" (Fig. 11). In these ways, the cushion-cover's status as a canonical work of Kongo, African, Atlantic, and World Art was established. With the publication of this article in African Arts, its status is further confirmed; while its prospective inclusion in the exhibition "Power and Majesty: The Art of Congo Masters" to be held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2015, and its illustration in the accompanying publication, will reinforce its status still further.

**SPECULATIVE PHASE**

Having been at least partially responsible for setting in chain the course of events that led to the cushion-cover becoming what is, arguably, the canonical Kongo textile, I have long felt obliged to ensure that a comprehensive account of it should be available. To that end, in November 2000 I arranged for fiber samples from it to be microscopically examined by Tim Lawrence at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and in June 2001 for other samples to be used for radiocarbon dating by Tom Higham at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit.

It is commonly said that the cushion-covers and other early Kongo textiles are made of raffia; that is, Raphia species, family Arecaceae (formerly Palmae). Tim Lawrence was able to confirm that the sample fibers do not originate from a grass and that they possess "anatomical characters in common with our [i.e. Kew's] reference material of Raphia species"; however, he was unable to "entirely rule out the possibility" that the material originates from leaves of a member of a different genus of Arecaceae or from another monocotyledonous family possessing silica bodies such as Cyperaceae (sedges etc.). In other words, although scientific analysis was not able absolutely to confirm that the cushion-cover is made of raffia, it also did not cast doubt on the identification of the fibres used as raffia.

As for the radiocarbon dating, the results were rather more exciting. Put simply, the fibre samples have been dated to the period 552+/−38 years BP (where BP is AD1950); that is, they date to AD1360−1436. It is, I suppose, possible that the raw material out of which the cushion-cover was made is significantly older than the cushion-cover; but this seems unlikely. It thus seems to me that we are on safe ground in dating it to the early fifteenth century at the latest. Given that the first contact between Kongo and the Portuguese was in 1482, this dating confirms that what was clearly already a highly developed art form was in existence before the arrival of Europeans. This is what scholars have long assumed, of course, but it is good to have scientific evidence to which to point.

Having marshaled this evidence, however, we are left with a rather large gap in the historical record. Radiocarbon analysis allows us to state that the cushion-cover was made by 1436, and from the surviving documentation detailed above we know more or less exactly where it has been since it was recovered from the Clarendon Building in early 1883 and what has been done with it since—that is, where, when, and by whom it has been examined, exhibited, and published. But where was it in the intervening 450 years? Is there anything we can say, with assurance if not certainty, about its history between the 1430s and the 1880s?

I have already noted a number of times the suggestion that the cushion-cover was part of the Tradescant collection, and it is to this possible part of its history that I now turn. As is well known, the Tradescant collection was formed in London by John Tradescant the Elder (ca. 1570s−1638) and his son John Tradescant the Younger (1608−1662). After the latter's death, the collection passed in due course to Elias Ashmole (1617−1692), who passed it along with his own collections to the University of Oxford, where it formed the basis of the Ashmolean Museum, which opened in 1683. There are no documents that provide clear evidence that the cushion-cover was part of this collection. As we have seen, it seemed to Edward Evans to be a reasonable hypothesis, and he was followed in this by Penniman, Trowell, and Williamson.

The latter, indeed, was able to suggest possible entries in Musaeum Tradescantianum, Or A Collection Of Rarities Preserved at South-Lambeth near London, the catalogue of the Tradescant collection published by John the Younger in 1656. Williamson (1983:340) suggests that it may be identifiable with one or other of the following entries: "Purses of the barks and rings of tree" (Tradescant 1656:1) or "A Table-cloath of grass very curiously waved" (Tradescant 1656:53). Unsurprisingly, little attention has been paid to the former very vague entry as opposed to the rather evocative phrasing of the latter. Indeed, I used the latter phrase as the title for my brief, unsigned article about the cushion-cover in an issue of the short-lived Pitt Rivers News (Coote 1994); and in our entry in the catalogue for the Royal Academy exhibition Hilde van Brackel and I state: "The history of this particular cloth cannot be established with certainty, but it seems likely that it is the 'table-cloath of grasse very curiously waved' that was listed by the botanists and collectors the John Tradescants (father and son) in the catalogue of their collection published in 1656" (Coote and Van Braeckel 1995).

In his entry for the cushion-cover in his African Art and Artefacts in European Collections, 1400−1800, Bassani goes one step further and links the wording of the entry with that for another Kongo textile in Denmark: "the description 'table-cloath very curiously waved' recalls the 'very artistic table cloth' ('tafeldecken') made in Angola, recorded at the same period in the Museum Weckmannianum, Ulm" (Bassani 2000:52). Unfortunately, despite my best efforts, I have not been able to find any usage of the term "table-cloath" or "table-cloth" for such a small textile, which would in modern parlance more closely resemble a table-mat than a table-cloth. The tafeldecken in Ulm, to which Bassani refers, is of table-cloth size, being 219 cm x 174 cm, which rather reinforces how the present cushion-cover (at 47 cm
The Kongo cushion-cover is displayed in the wall-case to the right. (Above it is a Sapi–Portuguese ivory salt-cellar from the founding collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum [1884.68.73], which was also on loan to the National Maritime Museum at the time.)

x 24 cm) is not appropriately described as a “table-cloath.” Moreover, as Evans’s catalogue entry demonstrates, it does not take a great deal of attention to recognize that this is a cushion-cover; indeed, I now cannot see how I ever thought it could be identified with that particular entry in the Tradescant catalogue.

Unfortunately, I am not able to propose with any confidence an alternative source. It has crossed my mind that the cushion-cover may have reached Oxford before the arrival of the Tradescant collection, for it is known that there were “curiosities” in the Bodleian Library, the adjacent Anatomy School, and some of the colleges from the early seventeenth century, if not earlier. Alternatively, it may have been given to the Ashmolean some time after its foundation—indeed, at any time between its foundation in 1683 and 1883, when Evans found it in the Clarendon Building. Given the lack of any relevant documentation, it would be counterproductive to list here all the possible sources. I cannot, however, resist taking this opportunity to at least raise the possibility that the cushion-cover may have been among the “miscellaneous curiosities” (Clapinson 2004:164) acquired by the antiquarian Richard Rawlinson (1690–1775) during his travels on the continent in the early 1720s, or at some other time in his collecting life. Rawlinson is known to have been in possession of a Sapi–Portuguese salt-cellar by November 1731, when he had an engraving of it made to distribute to his friends (see Fagg 1959:endpapers; Bassani 2000:55, no. 217). Although the present whereabouts of the salt-cellar are unknown, other (European and Asian) curiosities known to have been owned by Rawlinson survive at the Ashmolean Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum, and it now seems to me to be at least as likely that the cushion-cover came from Rawlinson as that it came from the Tradescants via Ashmole. As it happens, I have recently been able to demonstrate that a West African leather pouch formerly thought to have formed part of the Tradescant collection was actually given to the Ashmolean by Dr. John Sims in 1826 (see Coote 2011). It may be that another suggested Tradescant collection provenance needs to be set aside.

CONCLUSION

As I write (in May 2014), colleagues at the Pitt Rivers Museum are making preparations for the loan of the cushion-cover to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for its Kongo exhibition, opening in September 2015. On its second visit to New York, it will for the first time be displayed as part of a corpus of Kongo textile arts, alongside some two dozen related works: other cushion-covers, as well as hats, capes, and so on. Without doubt, both scholarly understanding and popular interest in the cushion-cover will be affected by its exhibition as part of a corpus. It might even lose its informal status as the “go-to” Kongo textile for exhibitions and publications.

What might ensure its continued, privileged position in the canon is the early date provided by radiocarbon analysis. No doubt, some readers of this article will wonder at the early date; indeed, a number of colleagues have expressed their doubts to me privately. Not myself being an expert in the field of radiocarbon dating, I can do no more than report the findings and invite further research and debate. What is needed, of course, is a program of further radiocarbon analyses and further trawling of the likely archives in search of any documentation that might help to fill in the gaps in the story—both that of the present example and those of other works in the corpus. Clearly, however, whatever happens, the career of the Kongo cushion-cover presently in Oxford is not yet over. It will carry on entertaining, informing, and inspiring museum visitors and researchers long after my curatorial responsibility for it has come to an end.

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In the catalogue of 1836 (Ashmolean 1836) it is noted that the cushion-cover "was given to the Ashmolean to the Pitt Rivers Collection in 1886, i.e. 1886.1.254.1. It had been assigned the number 1886.1.254.1, which was created retrospectively on December 18, 1995 by combining the accession number. The number was created as a result of the Pitt Rivers Museum's fully searchable, partially illustrated, and regularly updated database at http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/databases.html, or directly at http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID2383.html. All the information contained in the object's related documents file is available in the database entry, while in the latter the source is given (Lee et al. 2005b:64, fig. 16C). This catalogue entry has been misascribed by Evans (2000:53-4; see note 5) as "a Kongo pilecloth cushion 16 C" in the latter (Lee et al. 2005a:44, fig. 64) and "16 C Kongo pilecloth cushion 16 C" in the former (Lee et al. 2005b:64, fig. 16C). However, it is not clear from either publication as to its origin. Perhaps a little confusingly, in the catalogue section of Williamson's chapter (Williamson 1985:53-40), the entry for the cushion-cover omits Evan's manuscript catalogue description at length, without any reference to its Kongo— or even African—provenance, so it may well be that the up-to-date information provided by William Green in her introduction may have been missed by a number of readers.

8 Curated by John Mack, who was then Assistant Keeper in the British Museum's Department of Ethnography (Museum of Mankind), "Images of Africa" was one of the classic Museum of Man exhibitions that are fondly remembered and sorely missed by museum ethnographers, students of world cultures, and anyone else interested in understanding art in context. For the associated publication, see Mack 1990; for a review in the pages of this journal, see Schildkrout 1992.

13 "Kuba Textiles" was held in the special exhibition area, which was then at the front of the museum, from January 21 to April 29, 1995. For the exhibition brochure, see Coote and Mee 1995; for reviews, see Mowat 1995, Van Brackel 1995.

14 This catalogue entry has been misasscribed by Bassani (2000:52) to "Corbet Cushion and Van Brackel." The error is understandable, however, as an editorial grem- lin led to the entry being "signed" by JC (i.e., Joseph Corbett) and HvB, rather than JXC (i.e., Jeremy Coote) and HvB. (As it happen, the "X" does not stand for anything, merely being added by the Royal Academy's editorial team to distinguish Coote from Corbett, though not altogether successfully.)

15 Images of the cushion-cover also featured in the catalogues of the exhibitions "Kongo Arts History and its World Perception, 2000 BC–2003 AD" and "Kongo Kingdom Art: From Ritual to Cutting Edge," held at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan in 2005. Captioned merely "Woven and embroidered Kongo raffia textile brought from Kongo in the 17C" in the latter (Lee et al. 2005b:64, fig. 1.12), no information is given in either publication as to its origin or present whereabouts of the object. Moreover, in the former catalogue no source is given for the image, while in the latter the source is given (Lee et al. 2005b:303) as "Archive CRAHRC," that is, the archive of the Congo Basin Art History Research Center. Though taken by Heini Schneebeli for the Royal Academy catalogue, copyright in the image belongs to the Pitt Rivers Museum and in neither case was permission sought to reproduce it. I am grateful to Marc Leo Felix for bringing these publications to my attention and for providing copies for the Pitt Rivers Museum's Balfour Library.

16 In 1997 I was in correspondence with Josef Kan- dert at the Náprstkovo Muzeum (Náprstek Museum) in Prague and was interested to learn that he had recently been able to demonstrate that a similar Kongo cushion-cover in the Náprstek collection (22.5.98) had formed part of the collection of Rudolf II (1552–1612; Holy Roman Emperor from 1576) and that its history can be traced to 1607—forty-nine years before the Tradescant catalogue was published (see, e.g., Kandert 1999:128). This footnote seems a safe place to admit that part of the impetus for arranging for radiocarbon dating of the Oxford cushion-cover was a desire to reassert its status as the oldest attested example.
References cited


