reviewed by Lynne Cooney

South Africa’s legacies of racial violence and oppression wrought by colonialism and apartheid have had lasting reverberations on the postapartheid country. Radical responses to the continued inequities facing previously marginalized sectors of the South African population—including amaXhosa, amaNdebele, and amaZulu communities, women of color, and members of the LGBTQI+ community—have produced compelling images of resistance. Fashion and dress, as outward visual expressions, are powerful signifiers of South African postcolonial identity. Made Visible: Contemporary South African Fashion and Identity, presented by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was a thought-provoking and ambitious exhibition that considered the fashioning of the self through forms of dress and adornment. Curated by Kathryn Gunsch, head of the Arts of Africa and Oceania and Teel Curator of African and Oceanic Art, the exhibition included contemporary South African artists working in fashion, photography, video, and performance that engage with the politics of fashion and dress. Made Visible also refreshingly dismantled the disciplinary boundaries between fashion, contemporary art, and African art often constructed by encyclopedic museums.

Made Visible was organized around recent museum acquisitions by the departments of Arts of Africa and Oceania and Textiles and Fashion Arts, including a twentieth-century Ndebele beadwork ensemble and knitwear designs by the South African fashion designer, Laduma Ngxokolo. Placed on opposing circular platforms at the gallery’s two entrances, the Ndebele beadwork ensemble and Ngxokolo’s garments visually grounded the exhibition’s intersecting themes of identity and politics within the varied forms of contemporary South African fashion and art.

The presentation of the exquisite and intricately crafted Ndebele beaded ensemble broadened conceptions of the contemporary in South African fashion for general audiences who may equate fashion as the purview of designers. The ensemble was displayed in the exhibition as an example of the fashion statements of amaNdebele women, rather than as an illustration of Ndebele cultural heritage. For amaNdebele beadwork artists, beadwork is a potent and wearable expression of independence, wealth, and cultural identity. The beadwork ensemble comprised a heavily beaded blanket (ururu) made by amaNdebele women for informal domestic wear, a beaded woman’s apron (jocolo), and neck ring, all created using a primary palette of white beads with strips of brightly colored geometric patterns, and was exemplary of the artistry and visual complexity of Ndebele beadwork designs (Fig. 1). These pieces, which were made between 1950–1970, were accentuated by a newly commissioned beaded headband with a cross and jewel-toned leg bangles from two leading amaNdebele beadwork artists, Sophie Mahlangu and Esther Mnguni. Because the ensemble combined separate pieces made at different time periods and by several amaNdebele beadwork artists, Gunsch consulted with Mahlangu and Mnguni on the display, including the type of mount used, which was an important consideration given the culturally loaded potential of mannequins and dress forms as stand-ins for the black body.

Placed opposite the Ndebele beadwork display was a men’s knit ensemble by the fashion designer Laduma Ngxokolo. Since the debut of his knitwear brand, Maxhosa by Laduma, in 2011, Ngxokolo has incorporated designs inspired by the beadwork of isiXhosa speakers in his knitwear collections for men and women. The garment displayed here, from his 2018 collection, consisted of a V-neck cardigan and track pant that incorporated his signature geometric patterning and use of vibrant color (Fig. 2). Ngxokolo learned knitting and beadwork from his mother, and the designer’s adaptation of beadwork designs reformulates his “Xhosa” cultural identity for the global stage. It is tempting to read the juxtaposition of the Ndebele beadwork ensemble and Ngxokolo’s fashions in relationship to dichotomies of past and present or as a contrast between historical forms of dress and contemporary South African fashion. While, indeed, there are over six decades separating the oldest parts of the beadwork ensemble and Ngxokolo’s knitwear, both works illustrated different approaches to the contemporary, pointing to the way in which beadwork is, and has been, a means of cultural self-expression and empowerment in South Africa for past and present generations of makers and wearers of beadwork.

The majority of the artworks in Made Visible, however, were photographs, drawing parallels between the colonial and apartheid era archive and contemporary artistic responses to the historical photographic representation of black South African people. Forms of clothing and adornment were used by early ethnographers in South Africa, such as the Irish-born...
South African ethnographer Alfred Duggan-Cronin, to construct images of South African subjects that conformed to colonial imaginaries of the African “Other.” The South African art historian Michael Godby argues that Duggan-Cronin, for example, often introduced items of material culture and forms of body adornment, such as beadwork, in his portraits black South African people in order to create a more “authentic” image (Godby 2010: 54). Gunsch’s inclusion of Zanele Muholi’s self-portraits and Nomusa Makhuba’s digital manipulations of archival ethnographic photographs illustrated self-representation as a subversion of the ethnographic image. In Muholi’s sumptuous self-portrait Bhekezakhe, Parktown (2016), from their ongoing series Samnyama Ngonyama (Hail the Dark Lioness) (2016), the artist is adorned with a neck and headpiece made from industrial plastic tie wraps that is purposefully cloying in its allusion to “traditional” African dress (Fig. 3). But Muholi, who is known to heighten the photograph’s contrast in the printing process to exaggerate the darkness of their skin tone, employs such visual effects to entice the viewer. A visual activist for the LGBTIQ+ community, Muholi demands to be seen, challenging the viewer’s preconceptions of beauty, blackness, and queer identity.

Gunsch placed the photographs of Muholi, Makhuba, as well as several small-format portraits from the late 1960s and early 1970s by the Durban-based studio photographer Bobson Sukhdeo Mohanlall, between two sections, “The Photographic Postcard” and “Portraits and Personhood.” While these sections illuminated the way in which some South African artists use photography and dress to reclaim racialized images of the black body, the other parts of the exhibition were not divided into sections, and to do so here feels unnecessary and somewhat distracting from the exhibition’s unifying premise of identity and fashion.

The intersections of fashion, dress, and the performing body were central to the exhibition’s premise. The artists in Made Visible engage with the material and visual language of clothing in order to address the body as a creative and contested site in which to perform their gender, racial, and cultural identities—from Muholi’s stylized self-portraits to artists Senzeni Marasela, Sethembile Msezane, and Mary Sibande’s use of clothing as symbols of political and cultural agency in staged and performative actions. Senzeni Marasela’s Ijremani Lam (2013–2019), was the most pointed engagement with the performative potential of dress. For a period of five years, Marasela, who lives in Johannesburg, wore versions of the same dress every day—a bright red cotton shift made from shweshwe fabric that references a type of dress worn by black women in rural areas. Ijremani Lam is a physical and psychological embodiment of Marasela’s alter ego. Theodora, a rural woman in search for her husband, Gebane Mthetyane. Theodora is a union of the figures of the artist’s mother and the women protagonists in Njabulo Ndebele’s novel The Cry of Winnie Mandela (2003), that inspired Marasela’s project. In Ndebele’s novel, women wait for their husbands, many of whom left due to the brutal migrant labor system of apartheid that disintegrated black families. Ijremani Lam explores the politics and multiplicities of waiting. The dresses, some of which showed signs of wear, were lyrically displayed on a clothing rack as disembodied remnants of Marasela’s five-year performance.
The varied public reactions to the cultural specificity of Marasela’s dress—such as some interpreting Marasela as a domestic worker—draw attention to the entrenched cultural divide between urban and the rural areas and the failings of post-apartheid society to economically empower rural women of color.

The recent political movements #RhodesMustFall and # FeesMustFall have mobilized a younger generation of South Africans, who have visibly altered the South African landscape imprinted by the colonial and apartheid past. Several photographs and a video by Selomihle Mzezane were demonstrative of these collective actions of political resistance. In Chapungu: The Day Rhodes Fell (2015)—featured on the cover of African Arts vol. 50, no. 2—the artist is pictured elevated above an energetic mass reveling in the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus. The sculpture viewed by black students and other members of the UCT community as a symbol of institutional racism and white supremacy, Mzezane performs as Chapungu, the spirit of a sculpture from Great Zimbabwe, which, according to the wall label, was looted by Rhodes and remains in his private estate. Clad in high heels, a black leotard, and black hair extensions fashioned into wings, Mzezane performs both her gendered and racial body, which are equally uplifted through her outstretched wings that appear to single-handedly raise the sculpture from its base.

While the political underpinned the curatorial conceit of Made Visible: Contemporary South African Fashion and Identity, it was not heavy-handed. Drawing upon the antiapartheid visual activism of their forebears, contemporary South African artists today have developed a visual language that addresses the complexity of societal and political transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Made Visible offered a snapshot of current practices and competently demonstrated how fashion and dress are one strategy in the assertion of identity in a just and equal South African society.

Lynne Cooney is the artistic director of the Boston University Art Galleries, Boston, and a PhD Candidate in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Boston University. lcooney@bu.edu

References cited

Book review


reviewed by Ingrid Greenfeld

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time puts fragments to work. The book, edited by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, is the companion publication to the exhibition of the same name that opened in January 2019 at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, traveled to Toronto’s Aga Khan Museum in September 2019, and was planned for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in April 2020 (delayed due to the Smithsonian’s temporary closure to contain the spread of COVID-19). With 250 objects from 35 lenders, the exhibition highlights material products of West Africa from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries, when a large-scale trade network stretched across the Sahara, moving gold, salt, and enslaved people along with ceramics, copper, glass beads, ivory, leather, and textiles, over great distances. While some objects from this epoch have survived mostly intact—the exhibition and publication feature stunning examples of terracotta and copper-alloy sculptures lent by museums in Mali, Nigeria, and Morocco—the vast majority of material remains are in far from pristine condition. Although art museums prefer to showcase complete objects, Caravans of Gold convincingly argues that fragments can offer compelling examples of cultural production and exchange on local and global levels. For the volume’s contributors, fragments are not inert scraps or dead ends, but are vibrating with information, openended, with the capacity to enrich what kinds of stories are told about Africa in both the scholarly and public realms.

Before joining the Block Museum as associate director of curatorial affairs in 2014, Berzock was for eighteen years the curator of African art at the Art Institute of Chicago. There, she presented a number of internationally acclaimed exhibitions including Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria (2008) and successfully brought about the permanent collection’s relocation from the basement to expanded galleries on the first floor. But one can easily imagine how Berzock’s long-term, firsthand familiarity with the contested status of Africa objects in large art museums—from decisions about lighting, interpretive text, and “authenticity,” to the struggle for funding and regular representation on the museum’s exhibition program, to that old chestnut from your Aunt Susan and the board of trustees alike—“But Is It Art?”—might lead to this full-throated, joyful rebuttal to precolonial West Africa’s ahistorical isolation.

The volume is divided into four sections. The first paragraph of Berzock’s introductory essay, the opening chapter in Section I: “Groundwork,” succinctly lays out the where, when, why, what, and how of Caravans of Gold. To summarize: the Sahara, the world’s largest desert, has been popularly painted as a barren, inhospitable expanse of earth that, until European ships opened up maritime trade along the Atlantic coast in the late fifteenth century, effectively cordoned off West Africa, preventing sustained contact with dynamic Mediterranean and Middle Eastern spheres of trade. In fact, between the eighth and the sixteenth centuries, camel caravans transported large numbers and varieties of goods and people across the Sahara and its hinterlands, linking regional trade networks and local sites of production in the Inland Niger Delta, the Lake Chad Basin, the Central Sahara, and the Western Sudan with geographically distant systems centered on North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Levant, and Europe. The Sahara region’s key role in this global economy has, over time, faded from popular memory, supplanted by a historical narrative of Africa dominated by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.

The subtitle of the exhibition and catalogue is Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa. The deployment of “medieval” is sure to raise hackles. Applied to Europe, the term broadly includes the millennium between 500 and 1500 CE, but its suitability in non-Eurocentric contexts has been challenged by scholars who rightly push back on the pernicious Eurocentricism encoded in language that merges temporality with culture. As Berzock points out, the “global turn” in academic scholarship has promoted mobility, encounter, and exchange as themes that undergird much of human experience and culture around the world. In the traditionally Eurocentric citadels of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, this has prompted interdisciplinary efforts to understand more about direct and indirect contact between Europe and parts of the African continent, Asia, and