Cross Cultural Textiles

Linking Manchester to West Africa through textiles

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Creative Hands Foundation

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"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth’s sake.”
– Psalm 115:1

“It is impossible to consider life and art in Africa in the absence of textiles.”
An Introduction to Wax Printed Textiles

What is African wax print?

Wax print is a type of fabric named after its method of production. A wax substance, perhaps beeswax, resin or corn starch, will be stamped, painted or rolled onto cotton fabric to leave a patterned imprint. The fabric is dyed while the wax resin remains in place. The dye resistant wax protects the patterned area from the dye's colour. When the wax is washed off, it reveals a bright, bold white pattern against a dyed coloured background.

The technique is used in West Africa, taught as a skill and passed down through generations as a traditional indigenous craft. Symbolism is incorporated in the fabric design and motifs, and patterns are reused beyond fashion or trend. This means the fabric has become a historical document that enlightens us of aspects of humanity that have been carried forward and marked through centuries of dress wear.

In modern West Africa this tradition continues through African wax print, also known as Ankara. It is sold in markets and shops, in 6 and 12 yard lengths ready to be tailored into dresses, shirts, robes, wrappers, skirts and head scarfs. The designs still carry their symbolic meanings and are named based on those meanings. The style is almost synonymous with African design and culture, yet most of the modern fabrics are designed and delivered from Europe, and in particular Manchester, which links the heritage of West Africa to Manchester in a significant way. This important link is still carried on to this day.

Preface

Creative Hands Foundation are excited to share with you the discoveries we have made during our research of African wax print textiles in Ghana, West Africa, as well as here in Manchester, United Kingdom.

We thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for their support, as well as the budding team of volunteers with whom we have been able to unravel the stories behind wax print textiles that have travelled over 4,000 miles between Manchester and West Africa.

This book explores the important role that ABC Wax, other institutions and individuals have played in creating, developing and preserving the vibrant colours, the meaningful motifs and the excellent quality fabric that make their African wax print collection unique in the world.

As we travelled throughout Ghana in our search for first-hand information from those who sell and wear the fabric, we were given an understanding of meaning behind the motifs, and above all, interpretations from these soundless communicators.

Each step of creating the fabric is mapped out for you, as we guide you through making the handcrafted wax print as well as detail the contemporary developments in industrial print. Our aim is to help you learn about African wax print so that together we can preserve the heritage that has served a great purpose in the history of Manchester and West Africa.

Archive of ABC Wax Prints, Manchester

ABC Wax print after first colouration with dye and initial layer of wax washed out of the fabric. The print is created on both sides of the fabric, which adds to its quality. Photo: ABC Wax archives.
Why do West Africans love the fabric?

Wax print quickly became coveted in West Africa for its high quality. It has a substantial weight and rich, bold colours that together exude value. The fine quality of the material is something to show off, used as a way of showing a person’s status and loved for the indigo crackle, also known as cracking or bubbling. Veins of blue dye twisted into the fabric before drying, which helps to distinguish wax print from other fabrics and makes every piece unique.

The deep, double sided colour penetration is valued for both its beauty and its durability, as the wax can prolong the life of the fabric. It is suitably resistant to bright African sunlight, and the high-quality calico is a strong material that survives over the decades it is handed down through. The expensive ones are washed by the touch of the morning dew only and carefully folded up, ready for their next occasion to keep them safe and well-preserved.

West African people have a strong and well-enshrined tradition and culture. They relish wearing beautiful and flamboyant dresses, customised and designed to reflect events of any nature. When industrialised wax fabric from abroad entered the market, they instantly embrace the influx of the imported wax prints, because they were reminiscent of traditional local culture. The richness of colour and grandeur of design make them appealing to both rich and poor people.

The fabric has an important social value as well. West Africans have a tradition of naming and giving meaning to the motifs of wax print that are woven into the fabric. Many people do not realise that these motifs are of European origin and that they continue to be designed in Manchester today.

Where does African wax print come from?

Evidence of wax printed textiles appears across the globe and spans the past millennia, including a variety of indigenous African fabrics. However, the origin of the modern African wax print traded between Europe and West Africa is commonly traced back to Indonesian batik. Batik is recognised as a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO, as it is considered the peak of the handcrafted wax print. It is said to have reached its elevation in the late 18th century when a tool known as 'jangking' enabled designers to pour out molten wax with heightened levels of intricacy, which are believed to have never been matched by hand.

The batik style was brought to Europe by the Dutch during their colonisation of Indonesia. It was a period of industrial revolution and globalised trade that encouraged experimentation with fabrics, designs and dyes to test in the new markets. Due to the popularity of batik in the Dutch Indies, many Dutch printing companies tried to replicate batik for mass production for the Indonesian market, but despite much investment the results were not well received. Consumers felt that the quality did not compare to the handmade local products and race for customers between both sectors ended up flooding the market. Many factories dismissed wax print production as a failed endeavour, but one remaining Dutch factory, Haarlem Kaoton Maatschappij (HKM), had the fortitude to succeed where others failed.

Scottish entrepreneur Ebenezer Brown Fleming, working as a trader for HKM, took the unsold fabrics from Indonesia to West Africa, and in 1893 began trading the imitation batik in West Africa with success. The Manchester textile industry was quick to become involved, as many companies had existing trade routes to North and West Africa. Brown Fleming began creating motifs produced in the Netherlands as well as Manchester, and other designers also started to create specifically for the West African market. Over more than a century of trade, these British and Dutch-made prints have become known as African wax print. The designs are so well associated with West African culture that many people do not realise that they are of European origin and that they continue to be designed in Manchester today.
What makes ABC Wax unique?

ABC Wax is the only surviving textile company of the forty-six businesses that used to make up the British calico industry of the Industrial Revolution. They are unique to Manchester’s wax print trade with West Africa and provide a living source of information and history for researchers. ABC Wax holds an extensive archive of wax print designs, with over 35,000 designs on record. The archive also includes some of the earliest African wax print fabrics that were registered with the Calico Printers’ Association (CPA), spanning centuries. Some of the textiles can be used as direct records of Britain and West Africa’s turbulent social and political history. ABC Wax have preserved tools and original stamps that were crafted for the early industry, which give us an insight into the early production process.

ABC Wax has maintained high quality standards, which have earned the brand a reputation for excellence over decades of production. The quality of ABC Wax fabric is recognised and respected by the consumer, and in the 1960s and 1970s, they were leading the market as a high-status brand. In 2005, ABC Wax opened a printing factory in Ghana, together with its sister company Akosombo Textiles Ltd (ATL). The ABC Wax factory in Akosombo continues to put in extra efforts to make sure their fabric stands out in the market, which is rapidly swelling with imitation products.

African lady wearing the shell fabric design. This motif indicates that she lives close to a river.
20th Century: A growing trade

F.W. Ashton began printing wax prints fifteen years after Brown Fleming traded his first imitation batik in West Africa. Using hand blocks, motifs were repeatedly stamped onto the fabric to create patterns. The style was successful but laborious and so the company invested in duplex roller printers in the 1920s, enabling them to print (rather than stamp) wax on both sides of the fabric simultaneously, speeding up the process.

ABC Wax has a large collection of hand-stamped textiles dating back to the 1900s. The process involved dipping the hand-stamp in printing ink and stamping it on the finished dyed fabric. Each original piece had a regular hand-stamped pattern, which was later mimicked on machine rollers with engraved designs.

Political influences affected the trade over the next few decades. Firstly, Britain imposed preferential trade tariffs on West Africa as many regions were colonised by the British Empire. Later, during West Africa’s move to independence, competition picked up from other international traders. In order to stay competitive, F.W. Ashton bought out Swiss company A. Brunnschweiler and Co for their favourable trade routes; an essential move, as by this time 90 percent of their production was wax print. In 1968, F.W. Ashton’s largest single market was Ghana, and within two years the firm would change their name to A. Brunnschweiler and Co, as the Swiss company had garnered desirable recognition with African consumers. Some say this period was the height of the wax print trade as the fabric was used by newly independent

The Role of ABC Wax

19th Century: Newton Bank beginnings

ABC Wax began as Newton Bank Printworks in 1816. It was founded by the Ashton brothers who owned several of the early cotton mills in Cheshire. The factory was located in Hyde, Manchester and was part of the growing textile movement in Manchester during the Industrial Revolution.

Advances in science and technology meant the rapid expansion of output of textiles in Manchester and improved distribution routes to countries around the world. So much so, that the term ‘Manchester goods’ became synonymous with industrially manufactured textiles. Specific developments included steam powered printing machines that were later adapted into a wax print machine, and the accidental discovery of aniline from which synthetic dyes were produced, brought bold new colours to the materials used.

All of these methods put together helped the success of Newton Bank Printworks, which unfortunately survived longer than its owners and was passed on to Francis Tinker, who, taking his mother’s maiden name, began trading as F.W. Ashton. He retained the factory, which kept its Newton Bank name.

In 1899, F.W. Ashton became one of the founding members of the Calico Printers’ Association. They have been of immense benefit to the preservation of wax print designs. Many of the original designs were registered under the CPA and so ABC Wax have been able to print and archive designs from the 19th century onwards from these registries.

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Transforming Cotton Fabric into African Wax Print

West African people were creating wax print fabrics before trade began with Europe. The Manchester textile industry alone printed in the millions of yards distributed to the Gold Coast, whereby sadly many of the indigenous traders were forced out of the market. However, some people still work with traditional methods and styles, and by understanding indigenous wax print as the original tradition of West African consumers, we can see customs that continue to develop in the modern market.

We have documented two processes for creating African wax print. The first is a traditional indigenous method that is similar to those of many other cultures living in West Africa. The second is the current industrial process that was developed in Manchester and brought to Akosombo in 2006. We believe that it is important to share these methods as a way of preserving adapting and changing cultures.

21st Century: Move to Ghana

By the turn of the millennium, ABX Wax moved their production to Akosombo, Ghana, due to increasing pressure from external competition and a low price range set by the Chinese market. All material production was ceased in Manchester; however, ABC Wax retained their Hyde office for their print designers, who continue to design new motifs and patterns for printing in Akosombo. The Hyde office also has a small team that manages the growing archives, which have been added to since the 19th century.

The rest of the move to Ghana was a literal one. All of the machinery from Hyde was transported to Akosombo and installed in the new base. Senior staff moved to Ghana to be involved in training local workers and promoting and developing their local relationships within the market. Steve Dutton, the current marketing manager, says the move allows the business to react more quickly to customer demands and ensures a less expensive cost base. In addition to the main design team in Hyde, Manchester, Akosombo Textiles uses a local studio of designers to support the growing demands of commissioned designs. The brand currently prints ranges in wax, super wax, and fancy print, all varying in price to reflect their quality. ABC Wax still retains their reputation in the market and keeps a few of their printing secrets close to their chest.

Yoruba traditional handmade textiles

The Yoruba make up a large cultural network of indigenous people who have lived across West Africa for centuries. After the post-colonial division of land and creation of countries, the Yoruba people can be found predominantly in South Nigeria. We have chosen the Nigerian Yoruba, as in the city of Abeokuta a thriving practice of traditional handcrafted textiles can be found, which includes hand woven Aso-oke, tie-dye and wax print. The Yoruba people pride themselves on their entrepreneurial and artistic endeavours. Many Yoruba women have organised small groups in which they share skills and resources, thus helping to preserve the heritage of textile creation.

countries and individuals to express their national identity; transferring culture, politics and philosophy to the designs. A. Brunnhweuler and Co. eventually became ABC Wax, and in 1992 became part of the Chinese Cha Textiles Group.
The wax print textile is made using a process called ‘eleko.’ As with all wax print textiles, eleko uses a resist-dyeing technique to fashion designs onto fabric. Rather than resin, the Yoruba use commonly available products such as corn or cassava starch. The corn or cassava starch is prepared into a paste with warm or cold water to make it easy to spread across using tools for application; it can also be washed off easily after the dyeing process. Different methods of applying the paste have been developed, but methods frequently involve stamping or stencilling.

The process of making hand-stamped patterns started long ago, and it is still the slowest, but easiest and simplest method of making wax printed textiles. In the traditional wax process, the hand-stamp is dipped into the paste or hot wax and stamped on the plane fabric before the dyeing process. The established method of stamping requires handmade stamps to be carved from a hard fruit called calabash. Stamping motifs onto fabric with resist substances is known as block printing. The stencils are more modern and made of tin.

Initially, the fabric is prepared by being washed, soaked and then beaten with a large mallet before it is left to dry in the sun. Once dry, it is ready to be stamped or stencilled with the resist substance. The fabric is left to dry in the sun once again before it is dyed. The first dye will often be red, yellow or pink. These days Yoruba women prepare the dyes with hydrogen sulphite and sodium hydroxide (caustic soda). The fabric is either dipped into a bath of dye a few times or the dye poured over folded fabric. The resist substance then washed off and the process repeated with new patterns and or darker colours such as brown or olive green.

Modern Industry in Akosombo

The Akosombo Textiles factory produces an average of 30,000 metres of fabric a week, with a capacity of up to 140,000 metres per week. It is a large amount of fabric that requires multiple production stages, adding considerable complexity to the process. By filming inside the factory and speaking...
As a wax-resist technique is used for printing, the copper rollers are only used to apply wax to the fabric. The wax is applied where colour is not going to appear, so the copper rollers are engraved with a negative imprint of the design. The Akosombo technical team print out two negative films of the design from Manchester, a standard copy and a mirrored copy. Both versions are chemically transferred onto separate copper rollers in an onsite darkroom. The copper rollers are then passed through an acid bath that erodes the copper to a particular depth and reveals the completed designs.

Fabric preparation

The fabric used for this type of printing is a woven untreated cotton commonly known as ‘grey baft’ or ‘calico’. ABC Wax use a thick weave of calico as thinner fabrics were received poorly by the market due to their semi-transparency.

On its arrival at the factory, the calico is initially treated with bleach to remove any impurities. The bleached calico is then machine washable by being washed, pressed and folded.

Once the fabric is prepared, and the newly engraved copper rollers are fixed into the duplex roller machine, the factory can begin waxing. This part of the process has been unchanged for decades as the machines in Akosombo were originally developed and operated in Manchester. We found a machine with both production managers and employees, we have recorded the stages of the fabric’s journey. We believe that it is important to document this history as it is happening and that this record gives us some idea of the scale and efforts that go into the African wax print industry. Also, it shows how modern technology has helped to develop and improve the final produced product.

Design

An experienced textile designer at ABC Wax Manchester will create a design, either from independent inspiration or a commissioned print request. Often they will receive feedback from market researchers who travel to West Africa to study the textile market and learn from their customers. The finalised design is set at 16, 18 or 36 inches to fit the duplex copper roller printing machines used in the factory. Colours are chosen by the designer or the commissioner.

After approval, the designs are sent digitally and on CD/DVD to Akosombo Textiles in Ghana. Paper specimens including dimensions and ‘colourways’ (samples of different colours) are produced at the design studio in Manchester and sent to Akosombo as well.

In the design room at Akosombo Textiles, the designs are printed on paper to the required size. A negative film is produced, which will be used to transfer the designs onto copper rollers.

Copper roller construction

For every design that is created in Manchester, the Akosombo team must engrave two copper rollers to transfer the designs onto fabric. The duplex roller printing machine is constructed to feed the fabric between the two engraved copper rollers simultaneously. This is an efficient way of printing the designs onto both sides of the fabric. In order to achieve consistency on both sides the ‘front’ copper roller (1) is engraved as per the original design and the ‘back’ roller (2) is engraved with a mirror image.

Waxing

As a wax-resist technique is used for printing, the copper rollers are only used to apply wax to the fabric. The wax is applied where colour is not going to appear, so the copper rollers are engraved with a negative imprint of the design. The Akosombo technical team print out two negative films of the design from Manchester, a standard copy and a mirrored copy. Both versions are chemically transferred onto separate copper rollers in an onsite darkroom. The copper rollers are then passed through an acid bath that erodes the copper to a particular depth and reveals the completed designs.
As the mercerised fabric is introduced into the machine, a blade begins to coat the copper rollers with molten wax. The wax is made from pine resin, which has been heated to 108°C - 110 °C to make it easy to work with. After each run the wax is preserved to be recycled for the future; about 30% of new wax is added each time. The company has also developed a structure to recycle their textiles and copper.

The fabric is fed between the rollers and wax motifs are printed on both sides of the fabric. To achieve a good quality print, the rollers must maintain a consistent and specific temperature, speed and pressure. Once covered, the fabric is then sealed in a separate machine that helps to bond the wax to the fabric before dyeing. This prevents any dye from leaking through, fully ensuring a successful resist-dye.
Wringing. The impression creates veins of dye that are patterned uniquely across the fabric. This patterning is traditionally known as Indigo crackle, as it was originally produced with blue dye. The fabric is then washed in caustic soda to expose the white areas, highlighting the crackle further. Advancements in this technique allow the machines at Akosombo to create three different styles of this crackling or bubble effect, which have been named by the factory as follows:

Layering

The fabric may be re-waxed and dyed multiple times, depending on the number of layers and colour in the design. As techniques and dyes improved, the intricacy of the result has been heightened.

Block and screen printing

To add further layers to the initial design, the fabric goes through block and screen printing. During the blocking process, a mesh is treated with a chemical, ready for the new design to be pressed onto it and exposed to light and then turned into a screen. In Akosombo, the screens are attached to a machine that passes the fabric across it. As the fabric is passed over, a blade begins to push ink through the exposed mesh, which will print the design onto the fabric.

Dyeing

The waxed calico continues along the production line to be washed and dyed. A typical starting colour would be African wax print's famous indigo blue. The amount of dye used is specified based on the size and the weight of the fabric and is tested by dipping small pieces of the fabric before dyeing begins.

The Akosombo factory has a chemical laboratory on the site so that the team can check the dyes for both quality of colour and resistance to the fabric. Here they are also able to experiment with new colours. All the dyes are sourced from the same two places to ensure that they retain the same consistency and colour richness that helped make the wax print fabric popular in West Africa.

Cracking

The process of removing wax from the fabric is called tunnel cracking. The machine will handle the waxed and dyed fabric in a way that removes the wax and causes a particular effect to the dyed pattern. This is achieved by a process of twisting or clocking from top: wax printed, Indigo dye, wax removed, cracking and screenprint.

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Wax Print Design in West Africa

Indigenous wax print designs: Adinkra

A remarkable aspect of the phenomenon of African wax print is how a fabric so commonly associated with African people and cultures can be created both in design and production by Europeans. Why do so many West Africans believe traditional African wax print is an African conception? To understand this, we have to look at the designs, and in particular, figure out why indigenous designs are created and how their creators receive them.

One of the popular traditional styles of wax print design in Ghana is Adinkra. It has been developed over countless years by the Ashanti people and is based on their traditional systems of belief. The Ashanti people are part of the larger Akan group, whose language ‘Twi’ is widely spoken in modern Ghana, which is perhaps in part the reason for Adinkra’s breadth.

Ashanti people devised symbols to represent aspects of their culture and humanity. Each symbol had a name and would have a meaning ascribed to it. The meaning often also relates to a proverb, linking the symbol to an oral history spanning hundreds of years. The chief principle of the Adinkra wax prints is to communicate a particular message by repeated block printing one or two of the known symbols across the cloth. By wearing a cloth adorned with a symbol, you are displaying a message to those around you without speaking. It can, therefore, become particularly appropriate at ritual events or ceremonies in which the majority do not speak, enabling expression of feelings through the choice of symbolic clothing. Since the symbols can communicate a belief, they become an important instrument for preserving the Ashanti heritage and epistemology.

Finishing

The fabric is treated with a softening agent to which ABC Wax add a distinct perfume. The perfume signals to the customer that they are buying authentic wax prints from an original African wax print company. Finally, the fabric is put through a calendering machine to create a shining finish unique to quality wax prints.

Before the fabric is sent to the market, a sample is taken to the lab to test for colour fastness, which ensures that standards have been maintained throughout the print process.

Finished wax fabric, Akosombo Textiles Ltd, Ghana
Adinkra motifs are likely to have been a source of inspiration for European designers, and there are modern designs that incorporate these traditional motifs, which allow the designs to be given more specific and expanded meanings. In essence, the creation of motifs is the creation of language, and as with any language, it reflects the identity of the individual and can be adapted and perceived differently depending on its context.

The cultural behaviour of naming and attributing symbolism to motifs is something that is integral to African wax print and is a defining quality of the style. It is an ever-present, fundamental means of West African appropriation of European prints. Throughout the centuries, as Europeans designed motifs, West Africans named them and gave them meanings that relate to West African life. The translations and interpretations of these meanings are key signifiers of West African cultural heritage.

### Bringing British designs to the market

The success of batik in West Africa encouraged British printing companies to make fabric designs specifically for the West African market. British artists, many of whom would not have visited Africa, would have to discover West African tastes. There are a number of different ways designers and commissioners approached this task. The ABC Wax archives show very early examples of British designs that have remained popular to this day, yet were conceived with different methods. By looking at the early examples of work, and focussing on prominent British designers and commissioners, we are able to navigate the different styles that became the first successful European-crafted African wax prints.

In the late 19th century, a Victorian designer, Christopher Dresser, took the role of art advisor for many Manchester-based wax print companies. He was intent on understanding his audience and so before designing he would ask questions, collect samples of indigenous designs, learn about traditions and speak with fabric merchants. He used this knowledge to make designs that would appeal and helped set the tone across Manchester’s wax print.

Dresser and many other European companies sent researchers to parts of West Africa to find popular images to use for inspiration. Many of the first universal designs were based on flora and fauna found in the region, perhaps not too dissimilar to some of the batik designs of leaves and feathers. One example of this is Kwadusa, which is said to have originated from the batik motif of the Garuda bird. The fan tail of the Garuda bird seems to have been replicated across many designs and developed to become Kwadusa, which in the Ghanaian language Twi means ‘bunch of bananas’. Kwadusa is a classic design and takes on other interpretations relating to nature as well.

Some designs used existing West African motifs. A simple way of appealing to the market would be to sample images that were already well known. One design that has retained popularity to this day is Adinkra, which is likely to have been a source of inspiration for European designers, and there are modern designs that incorporate these traditional motifs, which allow the designs to be given more specific and expanded meanings. In essence, the creation of motifs is the creation of language, and as with any language, it reflects the identity of the individual and can be adapted and perceived differently depending on its context.

### Adinkra motifs

- **Name:** Sankofa
  - Translation: Return and get it
  - Symbolic meaning: Learn from the past
  - Translated proverb: ‘It is not taboo to return and fetch something you forgot earlier on’

- **Name:** Gye Nyame
  - Translation: Except for God
  - Symbolic meaning: Supremacy of God
  - Translated proverb: ‘Only God has the power’

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**Jumping Horse**

The jumping horse represents strength and is worn as a symbol of power.
All the most popular designs are engaging, colourful and dynamic. The motifs connected with the landscape and cultures are wide-ranging and open to interpretation. In one sense, it is not important where they were designed, as it is the designs’ ability to capture the popular imagination that has given them unmatched staying power.

*Jumping Horse*; its horses are remarkably similar to those of the Nigerian coat of arms and are recognised by Nigerians as the same ones.

Ebenezer Brown Fleming also played a significant role in early fabric design. After he successfully traded batik to the West African market for HKM, the company offered him sole trading rights, affording him the opportunity to explore the market further, and provided him with a studio of artists to create his designs.

Brown Fleming took a hands-on approach, conducting empirical research by visiting the area to find out what interested his potential customers. One of the earliest designs in the ABC Wax archive and a notable example of this research is Brown Fleming’s ABC design.

ABC was devised in a period when the British Empire was making education mandatory in the Gold Coast, and considerable efforts made to spread the English language and schools built across the region. To reflect this civic change, and particularly a moment in political history, Fleming and his team created the ABC motif, featuring the alphabet, numbers, pencils, blackboards and inkpots.

After HKM’s closure ABC Wax were able to print many Brown Fleming designs. Although the ABC design was born from a specific period, the design has earned a timeless reputation and is considered to be one of the classic designs.

Photo: ABC Wax archives.
ABC Wax explained: “The Internet has enabled us, as designers, to communicate directly with our customers and distributors and therefore we can respond quickly to any given design or colouration brief.”

This fabric refers to 3 different meanings in Ghana, Fried potatoes and yam, leafy looking fish and broken remnants of a clay pot.’

The fabrics are sold across hundreds of miles and dispersed throughout multiple indigenous cultures, languages and religions that affect the way the wearer understands the world. This means that many fabrics have no single story, but rather each fabric inspires multiple stories and ideas that can be shared.

Giving Motifs Meaning

The ascribing of names, meanings, and symbolism to wax print motifs is a West African tradition. It is an essential element of African wax print being African. Designs denote messages for a particular situation. This gives depth of meaning that can only be truly understood in a cultural context.

This symbolism cannot be imposed onto the fabric by European designers, and often the designers and the end-users’ interpretations will clash. The people that play the largest role in interpreting designs on the market are the end-users, but African traders often instigate the interpretations. The majority of African traders are women, who go by different names in different locales; Mammie Traders in Ghana, Nana Benz in Togo. They provide European wholesalers with a voice from their customers, a dense network of distribution, and a rich source of local knowledge. The traders have a keen skill of marketing shared daily experiences by making the motif an emblem of this experience and selling it. The success of their branding forges the fabric into the cultural landscape so that it can become an expression of West African culture.

Nuts In Sugarcane:
The sugarcane represents love because it is hard yet sweet! This branding can be extended to naming fabrics and advising wholesalers on emerging trends, and popular colour variations. As these relationships develop, traders have begun commissioning their own print designs and have been provided with exclusive trading rights.

ABC Wax has recognised the importance of this role and made extensive efforts to show how connected they are to their market. This has been aided by their move to Akosombo, which was received with coverage by BBC Media Sports in Nigeria, and photoshoots with prominent people across the region. The company is also keen to use 21st-century communication to connect further with their customer base. Marilyn Hoyle of Wafa me nwa, Ghana, Akan

This fabric’s name is universal in Ghana, but is associated with many proverbs. You have taken me for a snail! The fabric can be worn by a wife to communicate to her husband that he has not treated her well. The motif also relates to a python, saying you think I am a snail, but I am actually a deadly python’.

The fabrics are sold across hundreds of miles and dispersed throughout multiple indigenous cultures, languages and religions that affect the way the wearer understands the world. This means that many fabrics have no single story, but rather each fabric inspires multiple stories and ideas that can be shared.

ABC Wax explained: “The Internet has enabled us, as designers, to communicate directly with our customers and distributors and therefore we can respond quickly to any given design or colouration brief.”

This fabric refers to 3 different meanings in Ghana, Fried potatoes and yam, leafy looking fish and broken remnants of a clay pot.”

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Classic Designs

Classic designs never go out of fashion. They are the most highly valued prints. The motifs are so famous they keep their meanings for decades, although regional variations of interpretations remain and commonly used for special occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, church services, coronations of royalty and funerals and other important times in a person’s life. Their meanings are proverbial, often used to communicate feelings, teachings, status and sometimes insults.

One interviewee said she could wear this fabric at a wedding of a young girl and an old man to remind the bride who is expecting a quick inheritance that she can also die. As classic designs are most often worn on special occasions, their purpose is usually to communicate a message for the event being attended. Some designs are created to commemorate particular events, and these are called commemorative designs.

Owuo atwedea, Akan, Ghana
Ladder of death
One person does not climb the ladder of death! The Ashanti produced an Adinkra motif of a ladder representing this proverb. Meaning: No one can escape death.

Commemorative cloths made for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to the British colony of Nigeria in 1956, prior to independence.

Kwadu s3, Ghana, Akan/Abobo to le gome, Ivory Coast and Togo French bunch of bananas/The snail out of its shell

The motif is said to have been based on the Indonesia batik design of a Garuda bird and has been adjusted in different West African countries. 'Abobo to le gome' reminds us that patience has no limits.

Akiykyidea kyi, Akan
Back of a tortoise

This fabric's name is universal in Ghana, but is associated with many proverbs

Wafa, me nwa, Ghana, Akan
You have taken me for a snail

The fabric can be worn by a wife to communicate to her husband that he has not treated her well. The motif also relates to a python, saying 'you think I am a snail, but I am actually a deadly python.'

ABC Wax archives

The ABC Wax archives have provided these images of classic designs; ABC Wax has printed the designs for the past century. The company aims to produce two hundred designs a year, with the hope that they will become classics, like these. We have added some names and meanings for you to see how West African eyes see a British design.

Gramophone-opawo – Ghana, Akan
Gramophone represents the introduction of the gramophone record to West Africa. Connects to technological history and for some to a better time, when these items were prestigious.

Akofena, Ghana, Akan
Sword of Kingship/Staff of Kingship

The design references the sword of the Ashanti King, representing power and authority. To be worn as a mark of status.

Rondelles, Ivory Coast/Wou Boro, Ghana, Akan
Wishing Well, Akan, Ghana

This motif represents a well just after a coin has been dropped in it, creating ripples. It reminds us that whatever we do will cause ripples and affect those around us.

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Growing Applications

Fancy Print

The fancy print is a cheaper version of wax print fabric. It bears similar motifs and patterns and tries to reflect the striking colour variations found in African wax print. However, it is a digitally printed imitation of wax print, and therefore, the end product is noticeably different.

It was brought to the market as a cheap alternative to wax print and as such is only industrially mass produced. The most discernible difference is that fancy print is only printed on one side of the cloth. Furthermore, there is a marked difference in colour quality, which can be spotted by anyone familiar with the vibrancy of wax print. For these reasons, the fancy print is not considered to be as good quality as wax print and the price tag echoes its lower status.

Fancy print serves a useful purpose in mass communication; just as wax print, it communicates a message. The fancy print is often printed with political, commemorative or institutional communication in mind. During significant events, campaigns or rallies, organisations can have a fabric printed to present a message that suits the circumstance. For this reason, we often see fancy prints with photographs of people, places or words printed on them, depending on what people are rallying for. The designs and meanings are usually abstract, so they cannot be easily understood quickly. Sometimes these images (such as photographs) are partnered with traditional motifs that add further context.

Organisations or companies can also use fancy print for promotional purposes. Charities and governments can promote campaigns to educate on issues such as health awareness; companies can use this medium to advertise their brands. Its lower price makes the style more accessible. This accessibility means there is an abundance of varieties in existence, and most certainly the role of Akosombo’s design studio will be instrumental in bringing people’s ideas to fabric. It has become common for institutions to create their prints whereby people can identify themselves as a community. There are universities and schools that use their logo for students to wear as part of their uniform. The fancy print is popular with church groups/goers and can also be shared or sold among their congregations.

Due to the versatility and the affordability of the print, it is a popular medium to spread messages and organise people in all walks of life. For this reason, the fancy print is an example of the important role cloth plays in West African life as a communicator. These fabrics have visceral meanings; in this sense, they are a natural progression from wax print.

Obatyn, in Chi, meaning a good parent. The black and white fabric is a symbol of appreciation for a dead parent or guardian. While the coloured fabric is used to honour a living caring parent or guardian.
Innovation with African Wax Print

African wax print does not serve only one purpose. Reflecting the expression of the consumer, it provides someone with space to act out a personal and social identity. For this reason, African wax print is never static, and its appropriation requires it to be fluid to suit the cultures and people that employ it. Flexibility facilitates innovation and creativity, and therefore Creative Hands Foundation would love to see it being used across Greater Manchester, Europe and beyond in this way too.

The brilliance and boldness of colour and design in wax print lend itself well to high fashion houses and is currently being explored by fashion designers globally. Haute couture designer Deola Sagoe uses combinations of wax print style to fashion new creations.

It is also being developed by individuals on a smaller scale. We met up with several local designers, including Godlin Maitland, Sidnie Couture, and Phyllis Adwoa Dadzie, who showed us some of the ways they incorporate wax print in fashion to be worn in Manchester.

African wax print can also be used beyond textiles and explored in wider mediums of art as a style of design. There are exhibitions around the UK put together by British people with West African heritage who explore their personal and ancestral heritage through motifs found in classic designs of wax print. As a way of interpreting self, Creative Hands Foundation encourages young people to create motifs for themselves on screen printed fabric to explore their identity using art.

The wax print design is not a style that is dictated to an audience and is recognised by specialists as something that leads from the grassroots upward. Consumers and traders have always thought about these fabrics creatively, which makes them a natural resource for innovation as part of their continuing heritage.
Preserving Wax Print Heritage

African wax print fabrics are recordings of collaborations between printers, designers, traders, distributors, and consumers. They exemplify scientific progress made in industrial technology and the chemistry of dyes that gave birth to a fine quality material produced in Manchester. They map the development of symbols and motifs from Indonesia, Europe, and Africa that create striking designs with the ability to talk. They have expressed the lived experiences of West African lives and West African traders for more than a century. For these reasons, they are an art to be preserved and shared as a manifestation of West African cultural heritage and Manchester’s industrial heritage.
It is important to remember that although these fabrics may not be commonly seen on the high streets of Manchester, many African immigrants have helped to promote their use at local Manchester community events. We can see them being worn at funerals, weddings, church meetings, birthdays and for all kinds of important events that help promote and instil West African culture in Manchester. Black History Month is gaining popularity in Manchester, providing people with the opportunity to promote West African wax print textiles. This is done using cultural displays, storytelling, music, African drumming, and dancing, screen printing, showing documentaries and sharing books. It helps us to teach African and Caribbean children in schools about their heritage and show the continuing connections forged between Manchester and West Africa.

We believe that the preservation of these fabrics is fundamental to an accurate knowledge and understanding of the scope of the relationship between Manchester and West Africa that has been built through trade and design.

Phyllis Dadzie

Phyllis Dadzie

Godlin Maitland

Creative Hands Foundation will continue to share our knowledge with a wider audience using workshops for schools.

We are grateful to cultural institutions that promote this message through their own exhibitions. Manchester’s Museum of Science and Industry have exhibited the tools, fabric, and history behind the subject that first acquainted Manchester with African wax print. Also The Whitworth in Manchester archives a large source of African wax print materials that serves us well for greater studies.

‘The Whitworth’s textile collections include many objects that originated in Africa as well as textiles that were made in Manchester specifically for African markets. Prominent among the latter are industrial wax prints and so-called ‘fancy’ prints that date from the first half to the very end of the 20th century. The textiles are cared for in the Whitworth’s first-class, on-site storage units. They can be made available for viewing in the Study Centre by appointment with one of the textile curators. Also, African textiles and textiles that were made in Manchester for the African market are frequently included in the gallery’s programme of changing exhibitions’ – The Whitworth.
to explore the techniques of wax print, and expressions of identity through motif. We hope to continue holding and visiting exhibitions in cultural spaces, to share our collective knowledge and see undiscovered prints first-hand. We have engaged volunteers who have learnt and developed new skills, and this will all help to preserve this heritage, which we hope you will take with you to share along with us.
Our interest in the story behind African wax print was sparked off while visiting the wax print exhibition at the Museum of Science and Industry. The wax print fabrics themselves were so familiar; having grown up with them in Nigeria and discovering their important social roles at church groups and festivals. Seeing them behind glass in Manchester was surprising and much less familiar. We had no idea that so many wax prints were created in Hyde, and like many others, we assumed African wax print was manufactured in Africa. After learning about this, we had to find out more about their histories and so set about our project.

The resource provided from the Heritage Lottery Fund has enabled us to educate people in Manchester and West Africa about the authenticity of wax print textiles. It has also facilitated further opportunities for us to empower, teach, and grow people through sharing and preserving craft. Our shared background is arts, craft, and design and we are passionate about using these to support people’s development, by giving them the means to create their work and take pride in doing it. This project is a great expression of this passion as it could not have been achieved so successfully without the collective creative input of our volunteer team. We offer a look at some of the work gone into this project with the hope of inspiring others.

Volunteer training

We initially laid out six roles for volunteers with Volunteer Centre Manchester; however, due to the project’s popularity we ended up inviting seventeen volunteers on board, six of whom are of West African heritage. The first stage was then to set up steering groups with our new volunteers and existing board members. These groups provided us with the opportunity to devise research strategies, develop the project’s focus and discuss creative output.
Knowing this, we were able to assign tasks and identify scope and parameters of the project. It was important for us to provide achievable, rewarding work for our volunteers and so each of the six roles we had initially developed was broken down into small activities. The roles that the volunteers fulfilled for us were social media administrator, general administrator, photographer, videographer, interviewer, and workshop facilitator. We were also fortunate to recruit further eight West African people who were able to provide explanations of the textile designs and motifs found on the wax printed textiles in the archive of the Museum of Science and Industry.

With roles and tasks decided, we were able to begin training to provide our volunteers with skills they would need for this project, but would benefit them all individually as well. An oral history training session was held, giving valuable insight into recording information during interviews and discussions. A two-day digital photography course was attended by our photographers so that we could record the textiles visually in print and online. Similarly, we held two days of training in videography, which was attended by six of our volunteers and allowed us to document a film. Finally, we delivered training in workshop facilitation, firstly introducing volunteers to their responsibilities within the workshop and then developing them further so they could support the planning and delivery of two workshops held in schools. We received positive feedback from the volunteers, who said that not only had they gained skills, they were pleased to be able to put them into practice immediately for the project.

**Project research**

Our team of volunteers accompanied us to ABC Wax in Hyde. A two-day visit enabled us to put their training into practice, and they carried out the roles they were assigned. The team interviewed the manager, David Bradley, who gave us a guided tour of the design studio and demolished site. We then inspected, recorded and documented the large archives of ABC Wax’s textiles collection, stamps, copper rollers and screens. We were fortunate enough to take a volunteer with us on our trip to Ghana, who helped us to film, photograph, and interview for our research programme. We were also able to recruit three West African volunteers to support us with capturing footage and recording interviews. Interviews were held on site at the Akosombo Textiles factory and offices, during which we were able to record the process and capture our first meanings of the motifs. A factory production assistant invited us to the market to meet with merchants and distributors, with whom we continued our research findings.

Further, insight was captured from experts, academics, and curators connected with the topic in both Ghana and Manchester. We visited many cultural institutions in Accra and were lucky enough to find samples to display in our exhibition. Heading further outside of the capital, we spoke with Nii Kwei Dromo, a chief in the principal of Ga, and visited a community event that gave us further insight into the ways people use and relate to the wax print fabric. We were thrilled by the music, djembe drumming and dance by the Akrova Dance Ensemble from Kokrobite, Ghana.

**Project realisation**

To reach as many people as possible, we have created many different ways to engage people and spark their interest in wax print textiles. One wonderful experience for us, which we continue to practice, is bringing workshops to children and young people to explore the technique of resist-dye for themselves and to self-identify or work creatively with motif making. With support from our volunteers we held two workshops in St Mary’s RC Primary School in Levenshulme and Summerville Primary School in Salford. The workshops included teaching the children about the heritage of the fabric and the traditional printing practices found in West Africa. We have also held one-off workshops and repeat sessions to encourage women from the Manchester area to make their fabrics and designs.

To preserve our work for future generations, we have produced this book and a short documentary to be archived in the North West Film Archive. There will also be a showcasing exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery, which will include the documentary film, wax fabrics, stamps, short talks, traditional music, dance, and food.

Creative Hands Foundation are thrilled to be bringing this project to you. Whether you have arrived as a passer-by, or as an interested party, through a workshop, or as a volunteer, we
hope that you are able to take with you a new piece of our shared history, knowledge and understanding of wax print.

Our Contributors

Many thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund for providing us with the opportunity to explore Manchester’s role in African wax print history. Without this immense support we would not have been able to train and bring on board so many volunteers, who have all learned something new from the project. With this fund we have created new documentation of testimonies that will be preserved for future generations.

Thanks also to ABC Wax in Hyde, Manchester and Akosombo Textiles Ltd in Accra, Ghana, without who generously invited us to learn about their processes and their history, and also allowed us to use original photographs and film footage, enabling us to record an authentic account of wax print from one of the chief manufacturers.

We would like to thank all of the following people, institutions, and communities, for their support and contributions, which have made this project possible.

Volunteers

Attas Abubakar, Interviewer
Mirabel Ayavoro, Photographer
Ogheneyome Ayavoro, Photographer
Dwight Clarke, Former Board Member
Amelia Cuffy Nash, Member of Steering Group
Miss Emma Emimamiegho, Interpreter
Rume Eyalegin, Videographer
Julia M. Fanord, Researcher
Edith Fokam Mafogang, Board Member
Malakai Fujo, Participant
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Leigi Hunter Dodsworth, Videographer
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Ann Katherine Kvaernoe, Videographer/Photographer
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Lydia Darko, Akosombo Textiles Ltd
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Pa David Amenu, Nigerian Elder
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Charles Kotey, Cultural Director, Ga Municipal Assembly, Ga Central District
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Ed Watts, Engagement Manager, the Whitworth, Manchester

Amy George, Curator of Textiles and Wallpaper, the Whitworth, Manchester
Godlin Maitland, Interpreter
Koh and Phillis Dadzie, Fashion Designers/Interpreters
Edith Bagshaw nee Okandeji, Interpreter
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Miselo Kunda, Photographer

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Sources

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Creative Hands Foundation (CHF)
is a registered charity based in Manchester UK.
The arts charity was formed by Sculptor/Public Artist Joseph Ayavoro and Textile Designer Michelle Ayavoro in March 2008. They identified the lack of facilities and activities for local people to increase visual arts, craft and music skills.
Since our inception, we have equipped people from all backgrounds with practical skills in becoming self-employed as well as raised the goals and aspirations within the community and beyond. Our team of artists have vast experience in delivering workshops in Sculpture, Painting, Drawing, Ceramics, Textiles, Mixed Media, Public Art and Music.