

House Magazine
Issue 24
Spring 2013
The Design and Interiors Issue

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Waxing Lyrical

Clashing colours, graphic prints and cultural cross-pollination: how a historical craft came back into fashion

By Amber Butchart

BRIGHTLY COLOURED batik-style wax prints – both on the body and in the home – have been stealing headlines in design journals. Kate Burt of influential interiors blog yourhomeislovely.com links the phenomenon to the current trend for pattern and bright colours, and claims it's currently reaching the fringes of the mass market, having been steadily creeping into magazines and shopping pages for the past couple of years. The clothing industry has been beset with ankara prints since the Burberry catwalk

hosted them last summer. The art world is also no stranger to these prints; they feature heavily in the work of Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare to make postcolonial statements about international relations.

But the history of these prints is less well documented. Closely associated with West Africa, they go under a number of names: Dutch wax print, Veritable Java print and ankara are just a few. The batik process has been found on fabrics from ancient Egypt, and from 7th century India, China

and Japan, but the journey really begins in Indonesia where local production flourished and it became a much-admired art form highly prized by royalty.

The traditional wax-resist method of dyeing was hand-applied and labour-intensive. Colonisation of Indonesia by the Dutch in 1800 led to the industrialisation of the process as European technology was applied to the craft in an attempt to sell manufactured batik back to Indonesia. Selling 'local' fabrics to colonised markets was big



business in Europe from the 18th century; creating cloth for export could sustain whole companies in Britain or Holland in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

The renamed Dutch East Indies were not fooled. Industrially produced batik was seen as inferior to local handcrafted prints, requiring a new export market to sustain the Dutch factories. There is some debate over how West Africa became this new territory. It's possible that Dutch ships loaded with batiks bound for Indonesia stopped at ports along the north-west coast of Africa, leading to increased demand. Another theory is that African soldiers stationed in Indonesia took batik cloth home with them, which sparked interest. Whether through trade or war, the market for batik-style prints grew enormously in West Africa throughout the 19th century.

Until the mid-20th century the majority of these prints were produced in Europe

and sold to Africa – it was only in 2005 that the last UK-based wax-print company transferred production to its sister company in Ghana – and it is on this legacy that Shonibare draws in his work. With the independence of many African countries in the 1960s, local manufacturing grew and European companies began actively looking to the continent for inspiration, using political leaders and heads of state as featured prints.

Supporting the current crop of designers who use ankara prints is a great way of sustaining local producers. The Wooden Hills Bedding Company is the creation of East London-based designer Timothy Stevens. Inspired by the stalls of Ridley Road market where he has his studio, he only uses Fairtrade fabrics in his designs and links their popularity to a move away from the proliferation of cleaner aesthetics associated with computer-aided design. Lorenc

Rhoomes set up Akhu Designs last year while on maternity leave, and sources her fabrics mainly from Ghana and Nigeria. She cites increased demand as evidence that people are becoming more adventurous in their interior design decisions. Likewise, La Petite Congolaise was set up in 2011 by Laurence Kanza to put vibrant colours and dynamic prints in the home. Featuring fabrics sourced predominantly from Central and West Africa, the company has seen recent sales grow with the trend. As Kanza states, 'Wax prints are about individuality and self-expression; but more than anything, colour and creativity.'

For more African fabrics, the British Museum is staging *African Textiles Today: Social Fabric of the East and South* from 14 February.

[etsy.com/shop/AkhuDesigns](https://www.etsy.com/shop/AkhuDesigns)
LaPetiteCongolaise.com
woodenhillsbeddingcompany.com