

# Making and seeing: Matisse and the understanding of Kuba pattern.<sup>1</sup>

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A new icon has entered the public domain in Britain as a result of the development of late twentieth century communication technologies. Some British railway companies now use a black and white image to indicate that you are travelling in a coach where mobile phone use is discouraged (albeit with varying degrees of success). The centre of the image is occupied by an irregularly-shaped solid black form. Curved upper and lower edges perhaps suggest that it is set in a circular frame, but in fact it is surrounded by a white expanse and has no continuous visible edge so that it appears to be a single isolated icon. Or so it initially seemed to me; for, on the first few occasions I noticed the image, it puzzled me - even though I had deliberately sought out the 'quiet coach' on the train and might have expected some entirely understandable warning to observe a muted presence. Yet, despite this, I saw the shape as something like an umbrella playing a saxophone. It took several trips before it dawned on me that what I was supposed to see was a face in profile holding an index figure to the mouth in order to encourage passengers to be unobtrusive. I was reading the solid black shape as having primacy when in fact it was the outline that I should have been paying attention to and the white shapes which it inscribed. Now I know what it is, I can shift back and forth between the two images, a kind of 'lenticular' way of visualising a single image.<sup>2</sup>

This essay explores how different ways of seeing the same image may co-exist, but how that may be obscured by a western preoccupation with the linear - a habit so ingrained that it has come to seem instinctive, as has been insightfully analysed recently by Tim Ingold.<sup>3</sup> A crucial element of the discussion to be developed here concerns the differences in visual perception which arise from the ways in which objects and images are created. This,

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper derive from a conference on Anglo-Saxon design in its wider contexts under the title 'Why decorate?' at the University of East Anglia and organised with Chris Gosden and J.D. Hill in 2007. They and other participants are thanked for their comments at the time. I also subsequently presented aspects of the paper at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Oxford and at my own university, The University of East Anglia, where again I received useful feedback. I have been particularly grateful to other colleagues who have commented on this paper in draft, especially Simon Dell, Sandy Heslop, Allen Roberts and Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts. I have been grateful for the encouragement of Richard Woodfield throughout.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term here in a metaphoric sense. A true lenticular exploits the stereoscopic features of lenses to produce alternative images by slightly altering the angle at which a surface is viewed rather than, as here, by seeing the same image in alternative ways. For an insightful discussion of the significance a lenticular may have in contemporary visual culture see Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, 'flickering images, floating signifiers: optical innovation and visual piety in Senegal', *Material Religion*, 4:1, 2011, 4-31. There are also parallels to the argument to be developed here in Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception, A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, (1954, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines, A brief history*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Another related essay by Ingold is also echoed in this article: 'The Textility of Making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34, 2010, 91-102. The argument that different perspectives derive from working forwards from the creative act of making rather than backwards from a finished object to an assumed original intention is also evident in what follows.

in its turn, has implications for the ways in which images are seen across cultures and even within them. This is especially notable in societies which draw a gendered distinction between the kinds of making that are appropriate to men and those which are restricted to women, as in the example discussed below.

The question of whether different ways of making imply identifiably different ways of seeing has a limited bibliography. To the extent that we can find analyses which move in that direction, almost all discussions of the matter find it difficult to get to grips with the question or avoid it altogether. Neither Gombrich<sup>4</sup> nor Berger<sup>5</sup>, though both rich in insight, quite tackle the issue in its cross-cultural context; nor indeed does Wittgenstein in his classic discussion of the image of a duck which is also a rabbit.<sup>6</sup> We can find sympathetic phrases here and there in other works concerned with ways of seeing. Julian Spalding remarks: 'To understand the art of other ages and cultures, we have to make an imaginative leap into the minds of the people who made it. And to do that, we have to forget our modern ideas about art, history and about seeing itself.'<sup>7</sup> Agreed; but, working backwards from what we see now to how the same images and patterns might have been seen at other times and in other places, is far from easy. In the end the thesis Spalding develops is a rather bland one about art as a medium for creating a sense of wonderment – a perspective much more comprehensively argued by Alfred Gell.<sup>8</sup> James Elkins explicitly discusses 'the nature of seeing' at length; again, though he examines pictorial images from beyond the western canon, the issue of whether there might be different ways of seeing based on different cultural and artistic practice - and, if so, what those differences might be - remains largely unexplored.<sup>9</sup>

The most sustained argument of the kind developed here is perhaps that by David Summers in his discussion of the idea of 'facture'.<sup>10</sup> Summers notes that the word 'artefact' combines the idea of the final object with the processes of its making. The term 'facture' expresses this sense of the artefact as evidence of the continuum of actions which are involved in its creation. The object or image as encountered by a subsequent viewer is a record of its having been made, most apparent in what he calls the autobiographical style. Van Gogh's urgent brushwork speaks to his own technique and state of mind but at the same time the resulting painting is a record of the traditions of easel painting, the methods of preparing canvas and paints and the significance attached to painting in the first place. The same approach can be taken to work in other materials - in stone, clay, metals and so forth - which are collected, traded, assessed and then they are made into artefacts, all processes which are fundamental to the understanding of the final product. This does not necessarily lead Summers to a detailed discussion of how procedures of making may be

<sup>4</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order, A Study in the psychology of decorative art*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1979; *The Image and the Eye: further studies in the psychology of pictorial representation*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin, 1972; *About Looking*, London: Writers and Readers, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1953, part II ix; see also E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> Julian Spalding, *The Art of Wonder: A History of Seeing*, London: Prestel, 2005, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in J. Coote and A. Shelton, *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 40-67.

<sup>9</sup> James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back, On the Nature of Seeing*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> David Summers, *Real Spaces, World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, London: Phaidon, 2003, chapter 1 and especially 74-86. Richard Wollheim's discussion of 'Ur-painting' is similarly suggestive in its sophisticated treatment of the emergence of artistic intentionality from the process of inscribing random marks on a surface (*Painting as an Art*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 19-25)

implicated in the way things are seen, but the link of art to making through a focus on facture is none the less moving in the same direction as the argument in this essay.

One specific instance is examined in some detail below: that of design practice in an equatorial African kingdom – how it has been presented in the literature and how it is regarded in indigenous terms. Its discussion in the art historical and ethnographic writing has from the start represented the pattern-making in question in linear form, drawing it out in illustrations and inviting the naming of individual motifs. It has, in effect, been consistently written up as if it is a uniform decorative system. As a result it is assumed that it is ‘seen’ in a particular way – or rather, that western ways of ‘seeing’ are replicated elsewhere without nuanced differences and subtleties. This approach, I argue, hides aspects that it otherwise purports to reveal as a result of focusing exclusively on the final product rather than reflecting the processes of its making. The implications are, however, potentially wider than this particular example in so far as linear models of design and pattern have dominated writing about cross-cultural visual encounter – just as linear modes have dominated writing about history or the representation of processes of thought, as Ingold has explored.

### **Matisse and his ‘velvets’**

My problem in reading the ‘quiet coach’ image may have been precipitated in part by thinking about Henri Matisse’s methods of using collage techniques to create compositions. Around the end of 1943, Matisse famously turned from painting and drawing to creating compositions by pinning vibrant coloured cut-out shapes onto a base surface to create the innovative collages which characterised the production of his later life.<sup>11</sup> With the war in Europe and North Africa swirling close-by, he was living in the south of France, seriously ill and afflicted with failing eye-sight. Around him, arranged on his bedroom and studio walls for inspiration, were parts of his textile collection whose life-long influence on his art has been the subject of a recent exhibition and associated catalogue.<sup>12</sup> Whilst some of his later work has clear paternity in the textile designs which filled his field of vision whilst he remained stranded indoors as an invalid, others have a less obvious connection. A large Egyptian tent-hanging with a giant coloured rosette at the centre has an evident relationship to his designs for stained glass windows. However, the presence of Kuba embroidered textiles from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (the former Zaire) – to be seen alongside Tahitian *tapa*, barkcloth, in photographs of Matisse taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1943/44 – has a less obvious, but intriguing significance.

<sup>11</sup> There is a large literature on this. In addition to other texts cited here, substantive illustration and discussion is also to be found in John Elderfield, *The Cut-Outs of Henri Matisse*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978; Olivier Berggruen and Max Hollein (eds.), *Henri Matisse: Drawing with Scissors, Masterpieces of the late Years*, Munich: Prestel, 2002. For a definitive life of Matisse, see Hilary Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse: A Life of Henri Matisse, Volume One, The Early Years, 1869 – 1908* and *Matisse the Master: A life of Henri Matisse, Volume Two, The Conquest of Colour 1909 – 1945*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998 and 2005.

<sup>12</sup> The exhibition was shown at three venues in 2004-5: the Musée Matisse, Le Cateau-Cambrésis; the Royal Academy, London; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The catalogue and catalogue essays are published as *Matisse, His Art and His textiles: The fabric of dreams*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2005. An earlier exhibition exploring similar themes with specific reference to the Kuba was shown in Japan in 1992. The Catalogue by Mary Hunt Kahlenberg and Robert T. Coffland is published as *Matisse’s Secret, Kuba Textiles of Zaire*, Nogizaka Art Hall, 1992.

The textiles in question are generally referred to in English as 'Kasai velvets', or in French as '*velours*', referring to the region they come from on the southern fringes of the equatorial forest and, beyond that, to their appearance (though not to the technical details of their manufacture for they are not in fact 'velvets' but, rather, what is known as Richelieu embroidery). Matisse's tribute to his study of these textiles – which he himself referred to as his 'African velvets' – would seem to be the large colourful composition laid out landscape-style (as are the Kuba embroideries when square panels are sewn together selvedge to selvedge), which he entitled *Les Velours* (1947). But, if so, there is an interesting puzzle which arises. *Les Velours* does not in fact look like Kuba embroidered textiles and deviates from the canon of Kuba textiles in a number of fundamental ways, most notably in the shapes of the collages which are often curvilinear, not rectilinear as Kuba embroideries always are.<sup>13</sup> The picture also overlaps the vertical colours where Kuba design integrates different forms in a network but never elides them in this way. So, the cut-outs have moved a considerable distance from the prototypes on the walls around Matisse's bed and his wheelchair. Indeed, to the extent that they have an identifiable visual connection to Kuba textile-making practices, it would seem – paradoxically – that the greatest affinities are with the Kuba's own version of collage, their appliquéd cloth, and not with the embroideries. There, curvilinear forms are applied to a base textile which is worn as a wraparound skirt. These ostensibly cover a hole that has developed and follow the shape of the tear; however, other 'patches' are cut out and sewn onto the cloth to create balanced compositions in exactly the manner employed by Matisse with his cut-outs.<sup>14</sup> That said, there is no evidence that Matisse owned any Kuba appliqués or that he was even aware of Kuba appliqué practices. So we are left with a Matisse work apparently inspired by Kuba embroideries, but which has diverged very considerably from the originals.

I suggest that what is involved is a complex process of creative inspiration, an encounter not just with an otherwise unfamiliar decorative tradition from an unfamiliar culture in equatorial Africa, but with a distinctive way of seeing. Further, I argue that Matisse may lead us to an understanding of salient features of Kuba design which the more academic styles of writing to be reviewed shortly (and which have been in play for over a century) have steadily obscured. Indeed, it might be contended that it exposes the misapprehensions of a modernist preference for reverting to the linear and the representational when faced with understanding the complexities of a foreign practice of abstract design – one uncovered as Matisse himself was changing the whole format of his artistic practice when turning to cutting paper with scissors.

Matisse remarked of his Kuba textiles: 'I never tire of looking at them for long periods of time, even the simplest of them, and waiting for something to come to me from the mystery of their instinctive geometry.'<sup>15</sup> One argument might be that when he turned to cut-outs he did so because, just as Kuba design is an experiment with interlocking blocks of geometric forms, so for Matisse in older age and with diminishing sight it was easier to work with bold shapes than to draw or paint, both of which required close-up looking.

<sup>13</sup> I speak here of the cut-pile embroideries which are the focus of what follows. Some styles of 'linear' stitching do have a broadly curvilinear form, as mentioned below.

<sup>14</sup> See John Mack, 'De la nécessité naît la qualité; L'évolution de l'art textile chez les femmes Kuba', in *Au Royaume du Signe: Appliqués sur toile des Kuba, Zaire*, Paris: Fondation Dapper, 1988, 21-23. The holes are often produced in the process of softening the textiles which is done by pounding them with a wooden or ivory pestle.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Hilary Spurling, 'Material World: Matisse, His Art and His Textiles', in *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The fabric of Dreams*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005, 32.

Indeed, contrary to his own statement, it seems from other evidence that looking for long periods of time did indeed cause him eye strain and that he was deeply concerned with what he feared was incipient blindness. By 'looking' for long periods of time he may actually have intended to imply not just examining what was strategically placed in his line of vision on the walls around him, but also the act of closing his eyes and re-imagining the textile designs. This, after all, is a technique he used throughout his life in his own work and which he recommended to students of painting. 'Close your eyes and hold the vision', he told one student in 1908, 'and then do the work with your own sensibility'. Or, again, he is quoted as remarking: 'Close your eyes and visualize the picture; then go to work, always keeping these characteristics the important features of the picture. And you must at once indicate all that you would have in the complete work. All must be considered in interrelation during the process – nothing can be added.'<sup>16</sup> Not only did Matisse pre-conceive his work with eyes closed but he even on occasion drew and engraved whilst blindfolded. If 'eyes closed' was a part of his art practice, it could also be implicated in his notion of what he otherwise talks of as 'looking'; it is part of the concentrated act of conceiving and then executing an art work.

The purpose behind this was clearly to ensure that the detail, the individual motif, is considered not in isolation but in relation to the whole. His concern was with the overall organisation of pictorial space; and the whole, in fact, often gives the impression of extending well beyond the confines of the individual picture. It is characteristic of many of Matisse's paintings that they are flat portrayals, often lacking either strong perspective or indeed a clear centre. Again a comparison with Kuba textile design is apposite. As a result they have the potential for expansion beyond the area they actually occupy. This, no doubt, is what Frank Stella meant when he said of Matisse's pictures that he always remembered them as being bigger than they actually are.<sup>17</sup> His intention is to deny the eye the possibility of settling on one spot and then working out to explore the rest of the picture. He is, in effect, seeking to invite the viewer to adopt the same way of looking as he adopts himself. 'I try', he is quoted as saying, 'to make sure the image is whole as it enters the spectator's mind, after which it acts in accordance with its depth of expression and that of the spectator's mind.'<sup>18</sup> The idea, he remarked is 'to lose your way.'<sup>19</sup>

Looking 'with eyes closed' also had another implication. His cut-outs were not just about form but about the juxtaposition of colours, as in a related way his paintings had been. Matisse once remarked: 'Turner lived in a cellar. Once a week, he abruptly opened the shutters, and then what incandescence! What dazzling sights! What jewelry!'<sup>20</sup> The composition may be conceived in the mind's eye, it may be created in a half-light, but it emerges in its true vibrancy in the final work. What Matisse was looking to create, however, was not an 'avalanche' of colour, as he put it, but 'an organisation and construction which is sensitive to maintaining the beautiful freshness of colour.'<sup>21</sup> Colour, he asserted (in what is a

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Stein, 'Sarah Stein's Notes', (1908), in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, London: Phaidon, 1973, 43 and 45. These statements are interesting as expressing the switch from a symbolist concern with interior vision towards more modernist preoccupations. For a fuller discussion of Matisse's thinking in this period see Roger Benjamin, *Matisse's 'Notes of a Painter': Criticism, Theory, and Context, 1891-1908*, Ann Arbor, Mi: UMI Research Press, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Yves-Alain Bois, 'On Matisse: The Blinding: For Leo Steinberg', translated by Greg Sims. *October*, 68, 1994, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Bois, 'On Matisse', 67.

<sup>19</sup> Bois, 'On Matisse', 83.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Bois, 'On Matisse', 119.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Matisse, 'The Role and Modalities of Colour', (1945) in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 99.

familiar distinction), is about the senses where drawing is about the spirit. Thus, his cut-outs had a strong sensory motivation behind them. Colour was his means of comprehending the essence of things and of translating that into an emotional impact reconceived in a finished work. Kuba textiles, he thought, had about them both the compositional qualities and the simplicity which he was seeking to create. Their form and especially their deployment of colour were (as he described them) 'signs' - but not in the semiotic sense current at the time. Rather he was interested in the extent to which a juxtaposed series of contrasting coloured shapes across a pictorial surface could give an abbreviated description of the character of an intended subject.<sup>22</sup>

In *Les Velours*, as Jack Flam has remarked, 'the entire work is quite literally organised in terms of the structural principles of textile decorations.'<sup>23</sup> It is, it could be argued, the culmination of a life-long preoccupation with seeking to represent emotion - rather than transcribing the mere physicality of things. As he wrote,

There is no separation between my old pictures and my cut-outs, except that with greater completeness and abstraction, I have attained a form filtered to its essentials and of the object that I used to present in the complexity of its space, I have preserved the sign which suffices and which is necessary to make the object exist in its own form and in the totality for which I conceived it.<sup>24</sup>

If looking intently at his textiles, in the individualistic way Matisse himself recommended to budding artists, was complicit in this culmination of his pictorial agenda, what he was to take from the contemplation of his Kuba embroideries is markedly different from the conventional ways in which they are understood and interpreted in the extensive literature that has built up over the past hundred or so years. There are, in effect, two ways of regarding Kuba (and indeed any) textile tradition: one requires no enquiry of an ethnographic kind but is simply a response based on prolonged exposure to the visual qualities of the textiles, a form of connoisseurship; the other comes from asking questions of the Kuba themselves, searching for meanings - and much of it linked to the idea that far from being abstraction the designs are in some degree representational of, or have referents to, physical realities. But, for all that, are the proponents of the second approach (of which, by background and training, I am one) in a better position to portray the essence of Kuba design than, for example, Matisse?

Of course, the separation between these two approaches is not perforce a yawning gap. There is a certain resonance between Matisse's writings on his artistic intentions and the influential work of the social anthropologist Alfred Gell on the idea of the 'agency' of art. When Matisse talks of his ambition to produce pictures whose visual qualities initially defy the eye he is close to prescribing what, in writing about decorative art, Gell talks of as the 'cognitive indecipherability' of that form of pattern-making which tantalises and enchants.<sup>25</sup> Gell, however, goes further than Matisse. The apotropaic qualities of intricate designs, he suggests, draw the viewer in only to frustrate the act of seeing and, as wholes are mixed up with parts, continuities are confounded by discontinuities. If Matisse sought to invite the viewer to find his way to an understanding of the work, for Gell the point of complex patterning was to leave the viewer irretrievably lost. In his making Matisse seeks to educate

<sup>22</sup> For a useful summary of Matisse's reflections on the use of colour see John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: practice and meaning from antiquity to abstraction*, London: Thames and Hudson, c. 1999, 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Flam, 'Matisse and the Metaphysics of Decoration', in *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Henri Matisse, 'Testimonial', (1951) in Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 95.

the eye of the spectator in creating effects which are subtle rather than declaratory, which do not reveal their intentions but which all the same do not produce the perplexity that might lead to them being disregarded out of hand. He wants to move beyond the conventional ways of looking and shift seamlessly towards an evocation of emotion. The degree of perplexity is more of an issue for Gell. In a key statement he suggests that the 'enchantment' of things derives from pure wonder about how they came to be in the first place, as a Sunday painter (such as himself) might find the skill of a Vermeer unimaginable.<sup>26</sup> And clearly for Gell 'enchantment' has a double significance as both the quality of visual delight and of magic.<sup>27</sup> In that sense both Matisse and Gell see a significant entanglement of maker and viewer and by extension, we might suggest, the acts of making and those of seeing are intimately tied up with each other. For one it is a process of seduction, of drawing in and intriguing; for the other of repulsion, of confusing and thereby resisting the gaze.

This entanglement of making and seeing, then, highlights the proposition that different cultures might have different approaches. But can we go further? Do different technologies and arenas of artistic practice within the same culture therefore imply differently modulated ways of seeing? In the case of a culture originally documented without the panoply of modern techniques of visual testing, it is, of course, difficult to do more than speculate. Yet gendered differences in ways of seeing are precisely what the first ethnographic reports of Kuba culture hint at. We begin by looking at these earlier encounters before presenting the relevant literature in more detail.

### Encountering Kuba pattern

The Kuba are a people whose visual culture has only been known to outsiders for a relatively short period of time: the first coherent collections of Kuba art were made by William Sheppard, an African-American missionary, as late as 1892 and are now housed in the Hampton University Museum, Virginia. The influential ethnographer Leo Frobenius passed by Kuba country in 1905 and his collections are now in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg and in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia.<sup>28</sup> Then, shortly afterwards, a jaunty Hungarian-born ethnographer, Emil Torday, greatly extended knowledge of their history and culture making an extensive collection of objects, field-notes and photographs which are mostly housed in the British Museum where it arrived in 1908.<sup>29</sup> Although he worked and documented more widely in the southern Congo, his greatest enthusiasm was for the Kuba, of whom he became a major proponent publishing extensively on Kuba culture before and after the 1914-18 war, in both scholarly and popular contexts.<sup>30</sup>

Around 1900 the society these first outsiders encountered was one which, like a number of historical kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa, might be described as imploded. The

<sup>26</sup> Gell, *Art and Agency*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment'.

<sup>28</sup> David Binkley, 'A Century of Collecting Kuba Art', in Mary Lou Hultgren and Jeanne Zeidler, *A Taste for the Beautiful, Zairian Art from the Hampton University Museum*, Hampton Vi: Hampton University Museum, 1993, 27-32.

<sup>29</sup> John Mack, *Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo, 1900-1909*, London: British Museum Publications, nd (1990)

<sup>30</sup> Emil Torday and T.A. Joyce, *Notes ethnographique sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba ainsi sur les peuplades apparentées: Les Bushongo*, Tervuren: Annales du Musée du Congo Belge, Serie IV, 1911; Emil Torday, *On the Trail of the Bushongo*, London: Seeley Service & Co., 1925.

Kuba were essentially self-referential. They had no overall name for themselves. There are nineteen named subgroups each with its own chiefly structure, but acknowledging the authority of the king (*nyimi*). The term 'Kuba' (or 'BaKuba') was an overall name given to them by others. For themselves, they were simply 'the people of the king'. Torday also recorded the alternative term Bambala for the Bushoong sub-group - the term meaning 'people of the cloth'. Like many centralised states, they conducted their external affairs and their trade at the borders of their territory where markets were located; foreigners rarely penetrated to the centre of the kingdom and its capital Nsheeng. Indeed, Sheppard first travelled to the heart of Kuba country by following traders returning to the capital from markets located at its boundaries. This, no doubt, is amongst the reasons why external knowledge of the kingdom was delayed until late in the history of exploration of this part of the African continent. Sheppard, and most notably Torday, could present a people who - by comparison with, say, the Kongo kingdom closer to the Atlantic coast - appeared to have developed in something much closer to what they thought could be presented as pristine isolation. It seemed they could be characterised as more completely paradigmatic of untrammelled 'African-ness', a feature which chimed with Matisse's feeling for what he thought of as the 'instinctive simplicity' of their textile designs. And, in Torday's promotion of Kuba culture, a great deal of positive advocacy flowed therefrom.

The kingship was invested in the *nyimi*, selected by matrilineal descent amongst the Bushoong sub-group. He was heir to a dynasty which went back to the seventeenth century, the date determined by an oral tradition that the first king, Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, was ruling during a solar eclipse which astronomers were able to identify as having happened in 1680. Oral tradition recorded in varying detail events associated with the reigns of successive kings. Thus, when Torday began to write down accounts of the narratives of Kuba royalty he was able to describe a sumptuous kingdom with its own history; and by calculating forwards from the late seventeenth century to his own day it was possible to attribute approximate dates to successive rulers. In effect, he was able to convert unwritten accounts into a dynastic history of the kind familiar from archival sources for European kingdoms.

In the narratives royalty is central to the development of all the arts which are distinctive of the Kuba, including the invention of pattern, as is interestingly affirmed in an account by the American missionary Conway Wharton. Wharton was in the Kuba region of Kasai in the 1920s and gives a vivid illustration of the royal authority which underlies pattern-making, as it does other arenas of Kuba artistic innovation. He was responsible for the introduction of a motorbike into the area and arranged for a special viewing in the presence of the king. As the motorbike shot off down the thoroughfare it was enveloped in a cloud of dust. But the wonder of the watching court was not reserved for the disappearing testament to the power of engineering technology. Rather it was the pattern left by the motorbike tyres on the sandy street which proved the miracle. It was copied by royal sculptors and is now known by the name of the *nyimi* who witnessed its appearance – literally - on the streets of the Kuba capital.<sup>31</sup>

The Torday collection from the Kuba went on exhibition soon after its arrival in London immediately attracting scholarly comment; and, as I have documented elsewhere, it

<sup>31</sup> Conway Wharton, *The Leopard Hunts Alone*, New York: Fleming H. Revell co., 1927, 43-4.



came to the attention of British artists of the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> Since then a great deal has been written about Kuba pattern-making; and Kuba textiles are now marketed in such quantity that they are very readily available outside Africa whilst Kuba design has been extensively copied, originally by artists of the Omega workshops and subsequently by modern textile manufacturers. The designs have attracted the analytical skills of historians, art historians, anthropologists and museum curators alike,<sup>33</sup> and at least one artist has conducted intense visual analysis of Kuba textile patterns published in an extensively illustrated monograph.<sup>34</sup> Even a geometrician has been inspired to undertake a formal analysis of the distinctive patterns.<sup>35</sup> But all this attention can be seen as both a strength and a weakness. In the end there is arguably a problem which arises precisely because Kuba decorative practice is so thoroughly construed as a 'system'; indeed the ways in which this is expressed and illustrated in published accounts can be seen to obscure or skew aspects of the very phenomenon it seeks to explore. In the course of being interpreted Kuba pattern has ultimately been commodified. The on-going dialogue between those interested in Kuba visual culture and indigenous discussants and commentators has, I suggest, altered and reconfigured Kuba ideas of their own practice.

The patterns themselves are predominantly rectilinear in form - though not exclusively so, as those on curved surfaces such as buffalo horn, the female abdomen and some styles of rounded cup are themselves often curvilinear. It might, of course, be argued this is because they have to be. When the geometrician Donald Crowe examined the objects in Sheppard's collection he found that just over two-thirds of all the possible permutations of interlocking crochets, lozenges, crosses, diamond shapes and so forth were present in his otherwise relatively small sampling of Kuba artistry. These repeat across a surface but not always in a strictly symmetrical way. As one example of the practice, a textile collected by Torday (and familiar to many from its use as the cover image on the *Journal of Material Culture*) repeats a simple design in one half of the textile. However, although it has the same broad geometric form, as it repeats it becomes the negative of itself: black becomes yellow and yellow becomes black. It is typical of what might be called the 'studied irregularity' which is characteristic of many examples of Kuba design, especially those on embroidered textiles and the appliquéd skirts referred to in introducing this essay. In short, we might observe that a looser aesthetic seems to inform the design-work on textiles in general by comparison with the more regular, strictly-symmetrical, designs on carved surfaces or basketry mats, for instance.

<sup>32</sup> John Mack, 'Kuba Art and the Birth of Ethnography', in Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim, *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> Monni Adams, 'Kuba embroidered cloth', *African Arts*, 12: 1, 1978, 24-39; 'Where two Dimensions Meet', in D. Washburn (ed.), *Structure and Cognition in Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 40-55; 'Beyond symmetry in Middle African Design', *African Arts*, 1989, 23: 1, 33-43. Joseph Cornet, *Art Royal Kuba*, Milan: Edizione Sipiel, 1981. Patricia Darish, 'This is our Wealth: Towards an Understanding of Shoowa Aesthetic', *Elvehjem Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1996. John Mack, 'Bakuba Embroidery Patterns :A Commentary on their Social and Political Implications', *Textile History*, 11, 1980, 163-74. Vanessa Drake Moraga, *Weaving Abstraction, Kuba Textiles and the Woven Art of Central Africa*, Washinton DC: The Textile Museum, 2011. Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba Peoples*, Madison,Wi: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, chapter 12. Dorothy Washburn, *Style, Classification, and Ethnicity: Design Categories on Bakuba Raffia Cloth*, Philadelphia:Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 80:3, 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Georges Meurant, *Shoowa Design, African Textiles from the Kingdom of Kuba*, Thames and Hudson: London, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Crowe, 'The Geometry of African Art: Bakuba Art', in *The Journal of Geometry*, 1:12, 1971, 169-83.

## Processes of making

The process of producing most of the designs for which the Kuba are renowned in all the various media that they exploit involves working on restricted areas of a total design. In terms of making, this is not completely the same as the practices Matisse developed in turning to his bold cut-outs which involved trying out blocks of shaped colours in different juxtapositions to generate a decorative whole. However, Kuba patterns typically interlock and cover a complete surface such that a sense of the whole of the design is imagined in advance even when it is not laid out in plan before it is executed. The patterns, though numerous in various media, appear similar to each other in conception and look as if they form part of a common design 'vocabulary'. Each is named, though as we shall see the significance of these names needs to be treated cautiously. In this respect the work of men and women could seem to be alike. However, carving designs in wood involves laying out an incised linear pattern; mat-making, like the weaving men do, proceeds by putting in place successive cane strands or threads which imply linear, symmetrical methods of making. There are, certainly, forms of embroidery which also involve linear stitching, notably those produced by women from the ruling group, the Bushoong. That, however, is not the case with the Kuba cut-pile textiles which Torday collected and which have been exported in such quantities that they are now found in many museums and private collections world-wide. And it is here, rather than in the other arenas of Kuba design, that asymmetry is observable. (Figure 1)

Significantly, the textile embroidery on which we are focussing is an area of exclusively female design-work whereas carving, iron-working, mat-making, basketry and the weaving of the base cloth are all male activities. In other complex societies in sub-Saharan Africa it is common not just to find gender distinctions in craftwork but specialism, often (as, for instance, in the kingdoms of Asante or Benin) to the extent of there being formal crafts guilds with systems of apprenticeship and established practices of patronage. Kuba embroidery, on the other hand, is a skill expected of all women, whilst experience in basketry and mat-making is expected of adult men. Indeed skill in mat-making was a precondition of being able to marry. Some craft activities are regarded as requiring more expertise, as is the case with sculpture and weaving, and these are the basis of professional guilds represented at court. One commentator, Monni Adams, mentions (but does not draw particular significance from) the gendered aspects of Kuba specialism. She points out that two-dimensional arts are carried out in public spaces whereas three-dimensional specialist work is carried out in ateliers by professionals. Two-dimensional arts, she remarks, belonged to everyone whereas three-dimensional arts were of restricted ownership.<sup>36</sup> Whilst this is not entirely the case for textiles, it is notable that much craft production took place in public, often in doorways or indeed in market places or central squares; and some were communal in their nature. Mat-making was not necessarily the work of a single hand but could be carried out by groups of men working together across a surface; and the lengthy period of time it took to create squares of embroidery was often essentially the product of one woman but with different people taking it up periodically and adding to the design over the month and more it took to complete. So in these areas making was not a notably exclusive activity, nor yet a private one – but it was gender-specific.

<sup>36</sup> Adams, 'Where two Dimensions Meet', 48

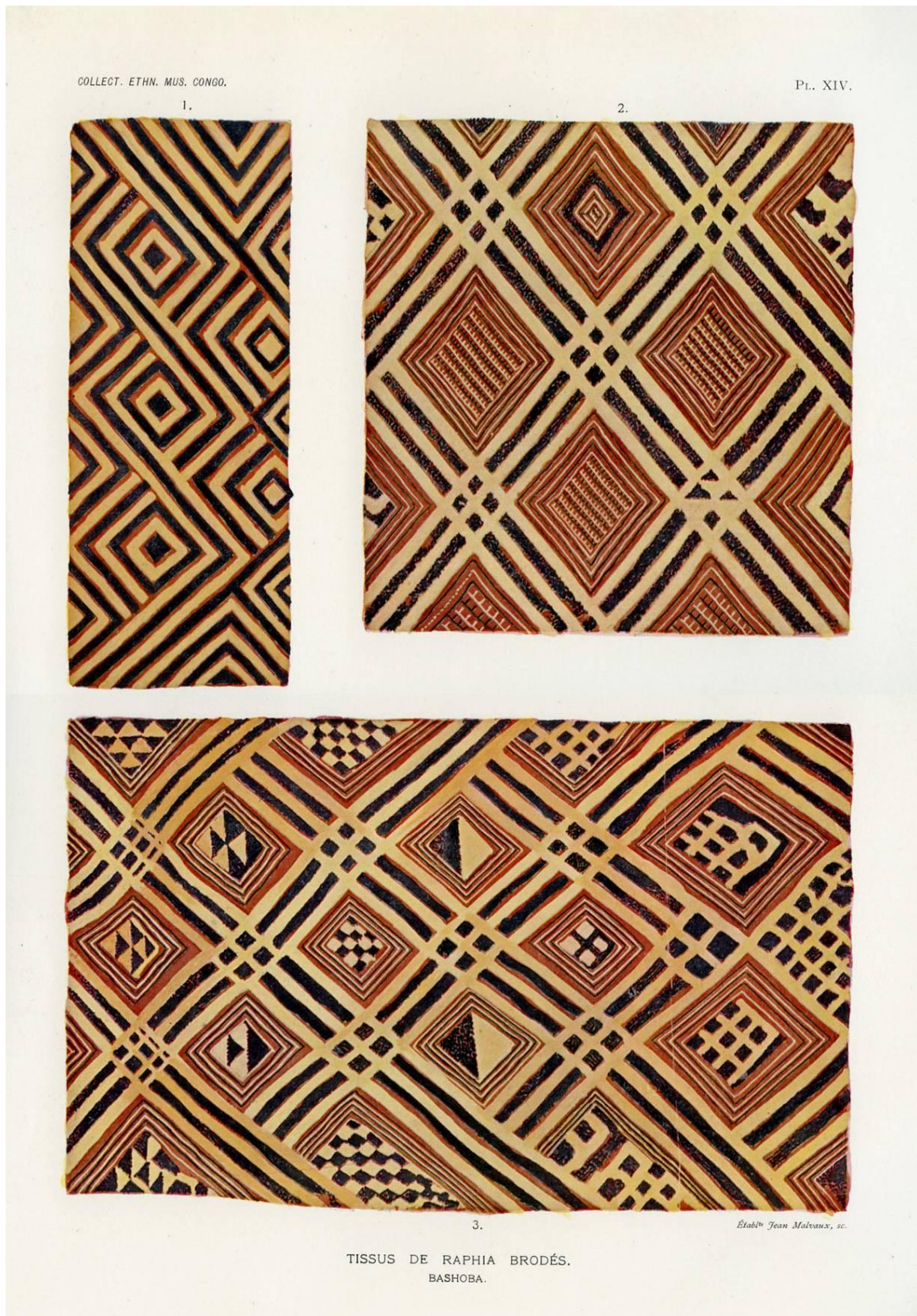


Figure 1 Shoowa (Bashoba), Kuba, textiles illustrated in Emil Torday and T.A. Joyce, *Notes ethnographique sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba ainsi sur les peuplades apparentées: Les Bushongo, Tervuren: Annales du Musée du Congo Belge, Serie IV, 1911, colour plate XIV.*



The base cloth to which the embroidery is applied is a square of woven raffia. Its size is determined by the dimension of a strand of prepared 'thread' from the inner foliole of the raffia palm leaf, approximately a meter in length.<sup>37</sup> Larger textiles are made by sewing them together side by side. The method used by women to produce cut-pile designs is to thread a strand of raffia fibre on an iron needle and pull it under a thread and up on the other side so that it leaves a short loose strand visible above the surface. The end which has been pulled through is next cut with an embroidery knife so that it is the same height above the surface as the loose end. The blade is then run over the surface to break up the raffia fibres and leave a uniform finish and the characteristic velvet-like end product. So what is created thereby is a point of coloured fibre. But, unlike the practice of Seurat, who varied coloured dots across a surface to create figurative imagery, the Kuba apply successive points created with the same thread so the result are blocks of the same colour, sometimes divided by lines though even so made up of shapes which, as we shall see, are to be conceived as blocks of colour. If there is a similarity between these methods of constructing an image it is perhaps closest to European mosaics rather than with the practices of wood-carving or mat-making which Kuba are associated with.<sup>38</sup> The one – cut-pile embroidery - is a 'pointillist' technique; the other – woodcarving or mat-making - linear.

To take the observation further we are fortunate to have an authoritative and relatively recent description of how a sub-group of Kuba typically make and regard their textiles. In the early 1980s the art historian Patricia Darish was the first and only outside researcher to apprentice herself as an embroiderer and to ask some of the more fundamental questions. Darish trained amongst the Shoowa, perhaps the most celebrated of cut-pile makers. Instead of the focus on pattern names and on the finished textile which characterises many other accounts, she has been able to explore how making relates to how textiles are assessed, how they are seen and how used.<sup>39</sup> Although there are regional variations and we should not assume that her observations necessarily apply to all cut-pile manufacture, they are revealing. Several distinctive points emerge from her observations which I summarise here.

Firstly, Darish notes that embroidering is something women do alongside the often more pressing tasks of cultivating the fields or attending to domestic and family activities. It has more of the air of a pastime as women work on the embroidery in an informal setting. The square of woven cloth is prepared by folding under and hemming the edges and possibly dyeing it a background colour, though amongst Shoowa this is completely obscured on the upper surface by the completed pattern. The first design consists of a series of small evenly-spaced triangles along one edge of the panel. Work then moves to the body of the cloth. It may start with the embroiderer stitching in some of the lines to guide her as work proceeds. Alternatively work may progress gradually across the textile without any physical pre-conception of the design. Torday collected several unfinished embroideries and they suggest that both practices were current in his day. (Figure 2). Whether the example with some of the lines indicated is for the guidance of novices and the other used by experienced embroiderers, or whether the two methods of working on embroidered

<sup>37</sup> John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles*, London: British Museum Publications: 2<sup>nd</sup> impression, 1991, 33-5.

<sup>38</sup> John Manley, 'Decoration and Demon Traps: The meanings of Geometric Borders in Roman Mosaics', in Chris Gosden (ed.), *Communities and Connections: Essays in honour of Barry Cunliffe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 426-48. I am grateful to the author for pointing out this similarity and providing me with the reference to his own article.

<sup>39</sup> Darish, 'This is our Wealth'.

textiles represent regional variations of practice as they were in the early twentieth century, is not clear. But, even where some indicative lines are laid out in advance, the embroidery is not simply a version of painting by numbers for the internal parts of each design element are usually varied as they repeat. Variation is expected. Strict rendering of a prototype is not the point; for, if it were, it would always be laid out symmetrically, followed precisely and constantly checked as work proceeds. And the plain weave base cloth, of course, has a regular structure to guide the embroiderer if she were looking to produce strict symmetry. However, Shoowa designs in particular display many subtle variations which suggests that the aesthetic is an exploratory one where the different possibilities of deploying pattern are tried out, varied and combined in an integrated whole across a single surface.

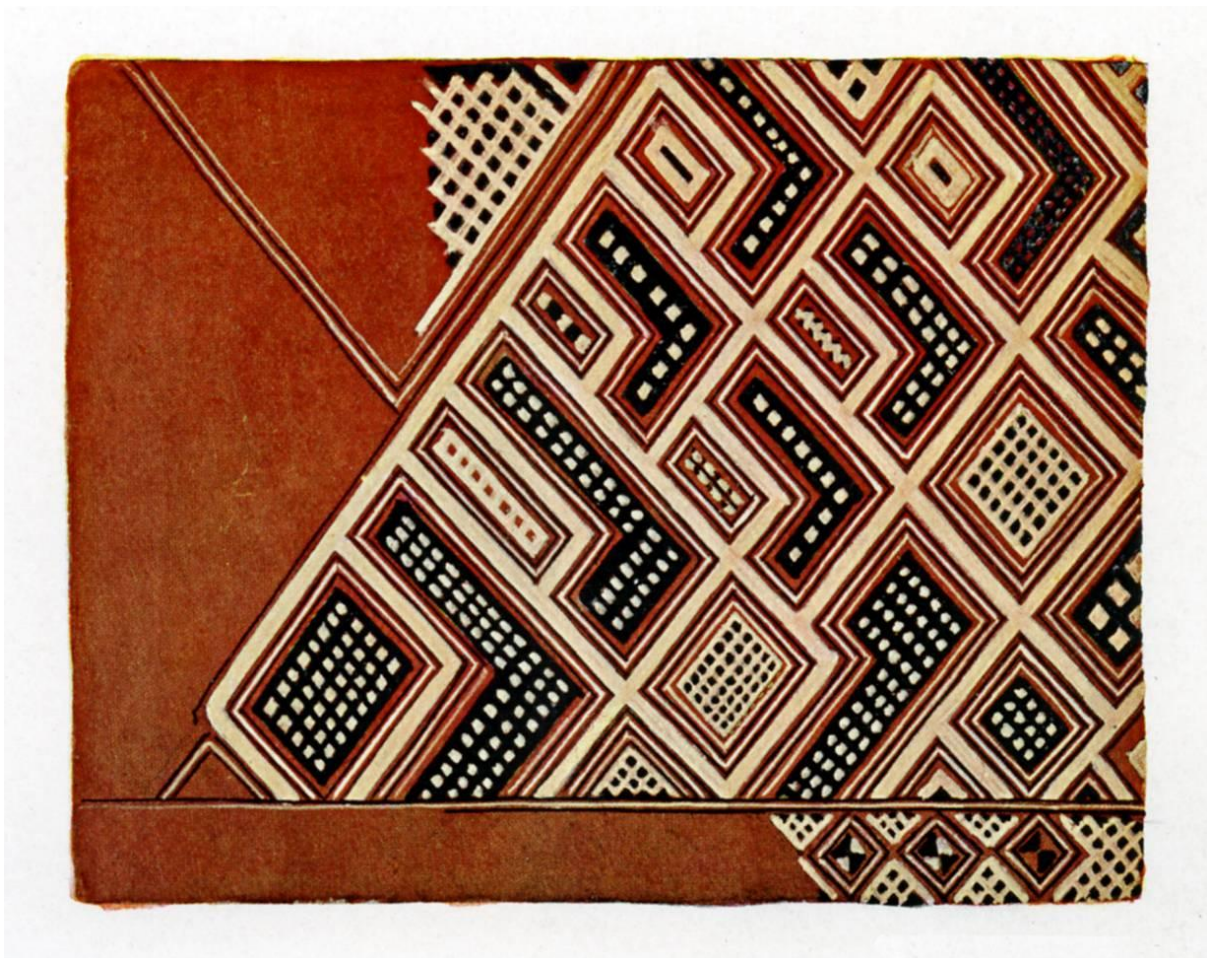


Figure 2 Partly-finished Shoowa (Bashoba), Kuba, textile in Torday and Joyce, *Notes ethnographique*, Colour plate XVI no.6

As sections of the cloth are finished they are rolled up to protect the textile and keep it clean, or another cloth is stitched on to cover completed sections. This is an important aspect for it means that the finished areas of cloth are not always visible or referenced as work continues over the weeks and months it takes to complete a single textile. Thus embroidered textiles are not made flat or laid out as on an easel, nor intended for concentrated contemplation (after the manner in which Matisse regarded them). Darish compares them to Chinese scrolls that are rolled up and never seen in their entirety in the

process of making.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as we also know from other sources, the finished textiles are not routinely displayed in public either, but are stored for use as grave goods. So, not only do older textiles from earlier generations rarely survive, but when complete they are not seen in daily life anyway. Women learn not by studying the patterns on existing cloths but from working alongside experienced embroiderers. Indeed, the creative process evident on a single raffia panel is also not infrequently the result of a shared practice as women may work on each other's textiles introducing further variation and, potentially, further endorsing asymmetry.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of the patterns that are used, it appears that, although women may know of as many as twenty different patterns from a wider repertoire of design, in practice their technical competence and experience is limited to the creation of only a few and it is these that they explore in their work. Innovation was not identified with the invention of new patterns but with producing variations on established design themes and configurations. Perhaps it is for these reasons that Darish found that embroiderers were not concerned to assess each other's efforts. Inviting opinions on quality is a somewhat contrived exercise in Shoowa villages; but, if shown anonymous work, women esteemed technical competence above other aspects.<sup>42</sup>

### **What do you call this?**

Despite this method of making, all discussion and analysis of two-dimensional pattern has systematically rendered it in a strictly geometric linear manner since Torday's original documentation of Kuba design and has assumed the existence of something like a full dictionary of patterns and associated names. Neither practices of asymmetry, nor the individual maker's restriction to only a small number of designs, are factored in. Joseph Cornet adopted the practice of drawing out and naming individual design motifs in his magnum opus *Art Royal Kuba*, based on a long-standing research interest fostered by friendship with one of the royal princes when he was Director of the Musée Nationale du Zaïre. Georges Meurant in a lavishly-illustrated book goes in for intense interpretation which makes it at times difficult to fully understand. 'A point', he writes, 'is immobile. By being repeated in one direction it can be made to imply a line which creates forms. The existence of tension between two points also forms an implicit line'.<sup>43</sup> He seems to suggest the kind of thing Ingold explores in discussing the practice of linking the stars in constellations so as to create named figurative imagery.<sup>44</sup> But surely this analogy has nothing to do with Kuba practice – the points in this case are juxtaposed, and of the same colour anyway, so they no longer appear as points but as blocks of colour connected in a deliberate and motivated way. None the less, he is suggesting that the essence of Kuba design is linear and it is therefore unavoidable that it should be rendered in linear form for the purposes of analysis and illustration. Pattern, in this understanding of it, is line enclosing discrete or interlinked space – and it can therefore be represented as separate linear form.

<sup>40</sup>Darish, 'This is our Wealth', 65.

<sup>41</sup>Darish, 'This is our Wealth', 60.

<sup>42</sup> Darish, 'This is our Wealth', 62-3.

<sup>43</sup> Georges Meurant, *Shoowa Design*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines*, 49.

A visitor to Kuba territory in the 1970s, Monni Adams from the Peabody Museum at Harvard (as mentioned above), wrote extensively on pattern, though she had little to say about naming practices as such and does not seem to have enquired into this aspect. Much of what she subsequently reported concerned her stay at Nsheeng and specifically Bushoong embroidery (and for that matter mat-making and sculpted design). Here she is on Kuba pile cloth:

The highest valued decoration is a form of embroidery that creates a pile about 5 mm thick on the surface...the pile traces linear designs which are juxtaposed with thick rows of embroidered lines altogether covering most of the surface of the cloth.

These forms of ornamentation create heavy thickly layered cloth.<sup>45</sup>

She does not illustrate her discussion with the ubiquitous isolated patterns but is clearly on message.

And then Dorothy Washburn, an archaeologist by background who has written extensively on the meaning and significance of design in different cultures, reported on her research on Kuba design carried out in the 1980s. She is otherwise well-known for her work on pattern and perception, particularly focussing on symmetry; some of this work has been conducted jointly with Donald Crowe. Her method was to take a large series of computer-generated designs and then ask Kuba to name them. Her conclusion is revealing of the assumptions inherent in the methodology. She writes: 'The importance of line was reinforced in the naming of computer patterns.'<sup>46</sup> Again the model for thinking about Kuba pattern is essentially and exclusively linear.

This practice of drawing, of generating individual, geometrically-precise motifs in outline and attaching names to them implies the existence of some coherent and consistent notational system. Indeed it implies that pattern is like handwriting where variations are like deviations from the copperplate, from an Ur-like standard. It is revealing that in Torday's notes the register of pattern names includes a significant number which have been translated as a 'faulty' version of something else, deviant forms which stray from the norm, versions of a pattern which – as he interprets it - have been poorly or inaccurately rendered. In Darish's work with Shoowa women embroiderers, however, variation is shown to be anticipated and encouraged. They give the illusion of symmetry but not the actual symmetry of computer-generated images; and, of course, the embroideries have texture which again is missed in the abstracted analytical representations of them.

Apart from these misgivings about the capacity of the analytical methods used to convey an appropriate understanding of the nuances of Kuba perceptions of design, these later accounts also miss some important subtleties that are found in the first description we have of the matter. True, the collection Emil Torday made and documented over one hundred years ago includes many of the elements which characterise later commentaries. He, too, abstracted individual motifs from a total design and asked the familiar question of Kuba artists: 'what do you call this?' (Figure 3). In the British Museum registers and in his published work these appear as isolated drawn images with the names of each configuration duly recorded. But this first attempt to record a Kuba vocabulary of pattern produced a much more nuanced response than subsequent inquiry has elicited. It is worth quoting in full. Torday described the fieldwork situation thus:

<sup>45</sup> Adams, 'Where two dimensions meet', 49-50

<sup>46</sup> Washburn, *Style, Classification, and Ethnicity*, 50.

When we come, however, to designs derived from textile industries it is much more difficult to follow the native mind. As long as we had to deal with absolutely correct patterns which have come down from times immemorial there never was any hesitation in naming them; but when the artist had attempted to improve on these, or through sheer incapacity or inattention deviated from the form usage had sanctioned, even our native experts were often in disagreement, and the controversy became so lively that we expected them to come to blows at any time. No man ever claimed to be an expert in embroidered patterns; this belonged to woman's realm, who again would give no opinion on carvings; and yet we find the same designs in both. We Europeans see a thing as a whole; the native considers one small part as essential and the rest as accessory; the name is derived from the detail. What complicates matters still further is that what is the basis of the design to the embroiderer, may be simply an unimportant detail to the sculptor; hence husband and wife may call the same thing by different names.<sup>47</sup>

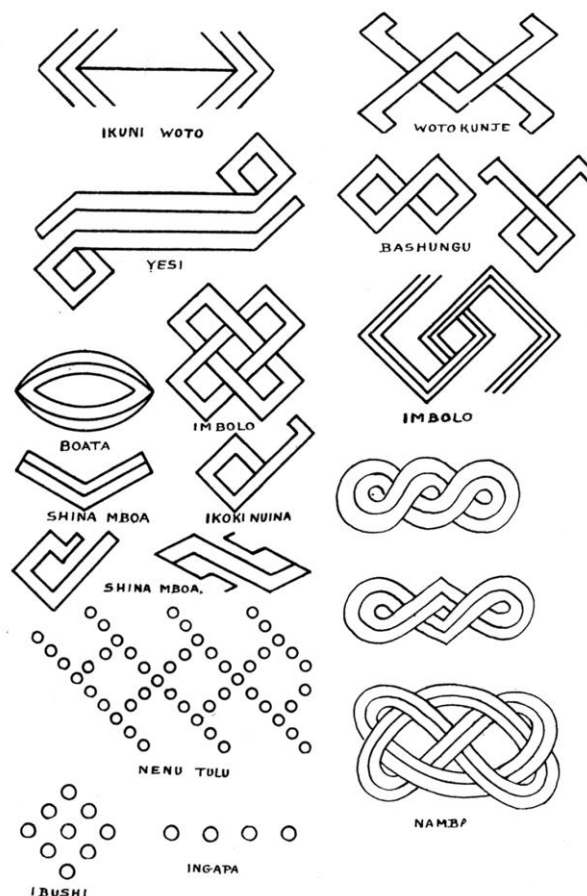


Figure 3 Kuba patterns with the names as recorded by Torday in Torday and Joyce, *Notes ethnographique*, fig 207, 162. (Those with dots rather than lines are copied from female body decorations).

Torday's discussion includes a number of distinctive aspects of naming practice as it stood at the start of the twentieth century. One is the way in which pattern names are attributed to particular configurations of design. The whole, he suggests, is named after the

<sup>47</sup> Torday, *On the Trail of the Bushongo*, 219-20.



part. In other words the pictorial space as a whole should have a coherence which is achieved by variations around a visual theme, and it is this which naming practices acknowledge. Naming the whole after the dominant pattern theme is like naming a book after the leading theme where the chapters are at the level of detail and specificity.

And this coheres with another anecdote recounted from the period. There is a story told about the first photographs which Torday took to Kuba country. Torday was far from being a talented photographer; nor was he, by his own admission, much good at developing negatives into prints in the field.<sup>48</sup> Indeed the images in his collection of photographs were probably mostly taken for him by others (on his 1908 trip, by his companion W. H. Hilton-Simpson) or they were prints taken from other people's negatives. He was, however, keen to share his photographs with those amongst whom he was working (as he was his phonographic recordings). When he showed one of the better photographs to Kuba he found they were initially unable to 'read' them. Their attention was drawn to trying to identify the detail such that they could not immediately understand the conventions of 'seeing' photographic representations. Based on a familiarity with pattern and the characteristic methods of naming complexes of design, Kuba were - as we might gloss it - looking for the contrasts which define blocks or shapes. Photographs lack sharp edges - they neither have the uniformity of colour of sculpture nor the contrasting colours of cut-pile textiles. The photographs of the period are effectively shades of grey which bleed into each other. It took some time before Kuba could see what the image was about. In fact, it took the adoption of a perspective whereby you can switch how and what you see between scanning for detail and surveying totalities: between seeing, first, the trees rather than the wood, and then the wood at the expense of the trees. Of course, line is important. However, it is less about lines as division and more a question of lines as edges. To that extent it is better to think in terms of blocks of colour arranged across a surface. The model is that of building, an architectonic conception rather than a linear one.

As making patterns is a kind of performance undertaken in public, so it seems is naming them. It becomes a kind of game. But if it is a performance then the act of drawing patterns out - rendering them in linear form or having a computer standardise them - is to try and stabilise what is mobile and exploratory. And this is at odds with processes of making and with indigenous naming practice. However, the general point that emerges is that obliging people to *name* things also obliges them to *see* them in a particular way, in this case a linear way. It leads potentially to a convergence of perception or at least an ability to see things in two ways, in what we started by suggesting is a 'lenticular' manner. One is a way of seeing based on processes of making, the other is a result of externally-driven analytical thinking. Significantly, what Torday found in the first decade of the twentieth century was not uniformity but difference - something which has slipped out of the discussion since. Then the visual perception of men and women - or more particularly of female embroiderers and male sculptors - were divergent even, as he describes it, conflictual. Subsequent discussion has failed to pick up on any gendered significance to how pattern is seen and named.

<sup>48</sup> John Mack, 'Documenting the Cultures of Southern Zaire: The Photographs of the Torday Expeditions 1900-1909' *African Arts*, 24:4, 1991, 60-9.

## Conclusion

The model of cut-pile embroidery, then, is that of building up a pictorial space rather than drawing it out. To that extent it is akin to the shift that occurred in Matisse's work in the 1940s when drawing was replaced by cutting thick paper with scissors and constructing pictures by trying out different juxtapositions of blocks of colour across a surface. It is significant, perhaps, that Matisse did not apparently draw out the shapes he wanted to create and then cut round them but cut directly into the prepared sheets of colour with scissors. In forgoing drawing and painting he was in a sense also forgoing line. Matisse's first and most comprehensive works in cut-out was *Jazz*, a folio of twenty colour plates accompanied by a text composed by him and written in his own hand (developed in 1943-44 and published in 1947, the same year as *Les Velours*).<sup>49</sup> Musical tonality was a much-exploited image Matisse himself used when discussing how art work is constructed. 'Jazz' is also a possible analogy to describe Kuba pattern-making where the suggestion of improvising round a theme is to the fore. But if this is an alluring way of thinking about Kuba pattern-making as a whole, it does not sit entirely happily. The symmetries of pattern carved in wood, or created in basketry or mat-making, would seem too rigid for it to be appropriate; it works better as a description of the studied asymmetries of embroidery. Improvisation around a theme is a fundamental principle in both jazz and in embroidery pattern-making and is deliberately cultivated as a creative technique.

All of which is to say that making and seeing are fundamentally interconnected (as, more obviously, are playing and hearing). What confuses the issue is naming. It is not even that on being invited to identify isolated motifs, Kuba use terms such as 'knot', 'smoke', 'back of a python's head', 'tortoise', 'xylophone' - terms which could easily lead to further complications by suggesting that geometric motifs are representational and that behind their exploitation lies a discourse of visual symbolism, something that is far from clear. Only some, such as 'Woot', (the name of the Adamic figure of Kuba mythology) seem to have greater significance.<sup>50</sup> It is rather that naming imposes structure and logic on what is often a more fluid process. A practice-based perspective might suggest that how you represent things is derived from how you see things. Here I am suggesting the importance of the converse: that how you see things is also related to how you make them. In the Kuba case an analytical focus on naming practices evident in ethnographic and art historical writing has obscured the second part of the equation and shifted discussion away from the significance of making. A closer reading would suggest that differences in making may indeed have been related to differences in seeing and that Torday was witnessing the implications of this. However, his own working methods – his privileging of the linear and the diagrammatic – was ultimately to dissolve the distinction when taken up and exploited by successive researchers. And since the 1980s Kuba men have taken up embroidery in the Kasai to exploit the international commercialisation of their distinctive textile designs paying little attention to the subtle, nuanced practices of women in earlier times.<sup>51</sup> Any of the original gendered basis of the making/seeing complex has now been superseded.

<sup>49</sup> Jack D. Flam, 'Jazz', in Jack Cowart, Jack D. Flam, Dominique Fourcade and John Hallmark Neff, *Henri Matisse, Paper Cut Outs*, New York: St. Louis Art Museum and The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1977, 37-48

<sup>50</sup> As is implied in the title of the most comprehensive history of the Kuba, Vansina, *The Children of Woot*.

<sup>51</sup> Darish, 'This is our Wealth', 65-7.

Ingold's insightful discussion of the emergence of 'the line' closes with the appearance of post-modernity and the fragmentation of the linear which is one implication of the emergence of the challenge to find a place within a world of dislocation.<sup>52</sup> T.J. Clark concludes his study of modernism in art with the advent of Abstract Expressionism, with Jackson Pollock and his randomised 'avalanches' of colour which make no reference to drawing or to lines.<sup>53</sup> In academic writing a preoccupation with the linear is readily associated with the various modernisms of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whether it be in art history, anthropology – or, for that matter, music. It is an aspect of that emphasis on certainties, on causal relationships, on predictability and explicability, which characterises the thinking of the period. It is perhaps significant in that context that Matisse should have surrounded himself with geometric textiles composed of blocks of colour when he himself took a definitive step sideways from a linear approach in his own art practice. If we are right in suggesting that *Les Velours* is a tribute to Kuba textile embroideries and that in the same period *Jazz* referenced a similar insight in the field of musical performance, they would both seem to highlight an interest in the disjunctions between forms of representation and objects. Matisse is not evoking the presence of an object but of the effects which it has on him, achieved by the arrangement of colour and composition rather than any more directly representational means. It was not a matter of line so much as of outline, a different way of making heralding a different way of seeing which we can rediscover in Kuba embroidery practices. Once we recognise such alternative ways of seeing, it is entirely possible to envision an umbrella playing tenor sax, premising rampant disruptive noise rather than its opposite - the orderly world of studious quiet which we are otherwise admonished to observe. Or indeed, as I conjecture Kuba women did, to switch between the two.

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<sup>52</sup> Ingold, *Lines*, 167-70

<sup>53</sup> T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, chapter 7.