

**Finding Her Culture: Aisha Ayensu's Ensemble at FIT**

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This paper analyzes the color, design elements, and texture of Aisha Ayensu's Cotton Wax Print and Chiffon Ensemble from Christie Brown's spring 2016 collection in the context of the *African Fashion Diaspora* exhibit at the Museum at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology). The exhibit is curated by Elizabeth Way and sponsored by the Couture Council of The Museum at FIT and the National Endowment for the Arts. Way narrates a guided audio tour of the exhibit available on the Bloomberg Connect app. The purpose of the exhibit is to explore how Black designers contribute to the discussion of transnational Black culture. The underlying theme or fashion concept of the exhibit explores ripple effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and how it disconnected black people in the diaspora from their native African cultures (Africa's Fashion Diaspora, 2024). The pieces tell the story of Black designers from around the world reconnecting with their cultures regardless of their current location or affiliations.

The most prominent design element utilized by Ayensu is *line*, the intentional arrangement of design features to guide the viewer's eye (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The three patterns on this garment display vertical, horizontal, and curved lines to keep the viewer engaged with the ensemble. The jacket's cotton displays vertical lines in its placement and pattern. The chiffon displays a horizontal panoramic landscape. The dress's cotton features a curved floral motif and is embellished with curved trimmings.

The bodice of the dress uses *rhythm* in its cut outs and trimming. This technique of repetition creates visual interest without too much distraction (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The trimmings mimic the shape of Ghana's Lake Volta. One can speculate the lake served as the designer's inspiration for the piece. The placement of the cutouts highlight the light *value* of the green leaf pattern printed onto the cotton.

The two separate pieces offer two different *forms*. However, the silhouette and physical shape of the garments complement each other well (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The jacket mimics the look of an American housecoat with its shift dress cut, knee-length, half sleeves, and open front. The stiff cotton fabric defines the shoulders and seams of the garment while the chiffon allows the garment to skim over the hips. The dress is an a-line cut with the hemline several inches above the knee.

Both the dress and jacket display *symmetrical balance* with the elements equally distributed on both sides of the outfit (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The seams, fabrics, and shapes mirror on the left and right side of the pieces. Additionally, the two pieces interact with each other through their shared elements. The fit and flare dress a-line silhouette is mimicked in the sleeves of the jacket. The paisley print on the jacket inspires the trimming on the bodice of the dress.

The pieces have little obvious *contrast/juxtaposition* but a closer look reveals some intentionally opposite details (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Some examples include the varied hemlines - above and below the knee -, the bodice cutouts are immediately lined, and the gold versus fabric trim. The fabric presents some additional contrasts. The cotton finishes are matte and opaque while the chiffon has a lustrous finish and is sheer. The final contrast are the patterns, the jacket cotton is reminiscent of nature while the chiffon and dress cotton accurately depict the florals and landscape.

When one first sees the ensemble from the front it may appear that there is no intentional *dominance* or focal point of the garments (Bell & Ternus, 2017). However a quick look at the back makes it clear the focal point is the beautiful safari landscape. All the other details on the front are there to support this print. The sun casts a golden hue that is complemented well by the

gold details on the dress. The longer hemline on the jacket allows the sheer chiffon to filter light and highlight the animals.

The *proportions*, how the sizes of each feature relate, for the ensemble are set by the animals and the landscape (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The sizes of each element are balanced against the size of the animals or trees. The florals on the dress are oversized and not true to life, so fewer appear on the garment, allowing the landscape to remain the focus. The paisley design is proportionate to the clouds and trees. Finally, the hemline of the dress is cut just above the animals.

Despite its busy and multi-faceted design, the outfit is able to remain grounded through its use of *repetition*. The colors, themes, and patterns repeat throughout the outfit (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The colors are *earth tones* with a white *tint* creating a general washed out effect except the trees which are *shaded* with black. All three patterns are nature centric. The chiffon portrays an east african safari landscape with zebras and giraffes, the dress cotton is printed with a floral pattern, and the jacket cotton is printed with a green paisley leaf design.

The *texture*, the quality and tactile feel of the garments. This is not an interactive exhibit so the analysis of the ensemble's texture is assumed based on the visual appearance of the fabrics. Both fabrics utilized are smooth but their sheens differ slightly to create visual interest when under direct light. The cotton appears to be a pima cotton and the chiffon is likely a polyester chiffon (The Textile Kit). The opaque cotton is matte and the sheer chiffon slightly shimmers.

While this paper refers colloquially to the ensemble as an 'outfit' it is more accurate to say 'the base of an outfit' since these pieces do not include many of the elements of dress. Some of these missing elements are key to an outfit. These elements include shoes, head coverings,

jewelry, scent, and makeup. Dress, its elements, and its perception vary across all cultures including the diverse cultures in Africa. In the United States a culture's dress is explored through immigrants and descendants who maintain the customs and fashions.

The success of this exhibit and growing popularity of Black and African designers reflect a shift in Hollywood's perception of African culture. This shift is driven by a growing interest of these designers to connect to their roots. This is a circular shift, both Hollywood and Black culture draw inspiration and inspire each other. The 2023 addition of Best Afrobeats Video to the MTV Video Music Award show was in response to the global popularity of the song 'Calm Down', a collaboration of the Nigerian singer Rema and Selena Gomez. This piece was inspired by *The Sound Of The Music* (1965) and works to shift the dominant western perspective on African cultures.

Unfortunately, stereotypes and negative associations can be placed on a culture's dress through negative news coverage. Which side of an international conflict is depicted as the bad guys often leads to an increase in that culture's dress being the target of inappropriate jokes, hate crimes, and discrimination. Examples include, islamophobia after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the rise in anti Asian hate crimes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kaplan, 2006). According to a 2023 study sixty three percent of Black adults in the United States believe that news coverage of Black people is more negative than the coverage of other groups (Salami & says, 2019). Perhaps this belief is part of the fuel behind the movement of Black designers working to reconnect and represent their African roots.

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Figure 1. Prairie Princess collection ensemble at the Museum at FIT  
Front



Figure 2. Prairie Princess collection ensemble at the Museum at FIT  
Back



Figure 3. Proof of visit

### References

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