

Man's Cloth, c. 1920–70, made by the Ewe or Adangme culture, Ghana or Togo



Armlet, 1500s, made in the Benin Kingdom, Nigeria

About the Artwork

Ewe (ay-vay) woven cloths are typically worn for important events such as funerals, puberty rites, weddings, and in celebration of newborns. Cloths like this one are handmade, labor intensive, and quite expensive. They serve as both status symbols and symbols of identity for wearers. When worn by men, the cloths are wrapped around the body and draped over the shoulder, much like a toga, and fall evenly to the wearer's ankles (see photo on the right). Women may wear the cloths in many different ways: wrapped under their arms leaving both shoulders bare, as a skirt over which a blouse is worn, as a wrap around their necks, or in the toga-like way that men do.

A typical man's cloth is made up of many thin, woven strips, each four to eight inches wide. This particular cloth is constructed from twenty-two individual strips sewn together on their long edges, which are called selvages. These strips are carefully joined to create an impressively regular pattern, which when taken as a whole gives a checkered appearance. In addition to changing colors and patterns in the cloth, weavers can switch between different weave structures to add variation to the pattern. Tighter weave structures create narrower strips while looser structures create wider strips. The weaver of this cloth chose to regularly switch between different weave structures, creating patterned strips that have a wavy rather than straight edge.

Look Closely

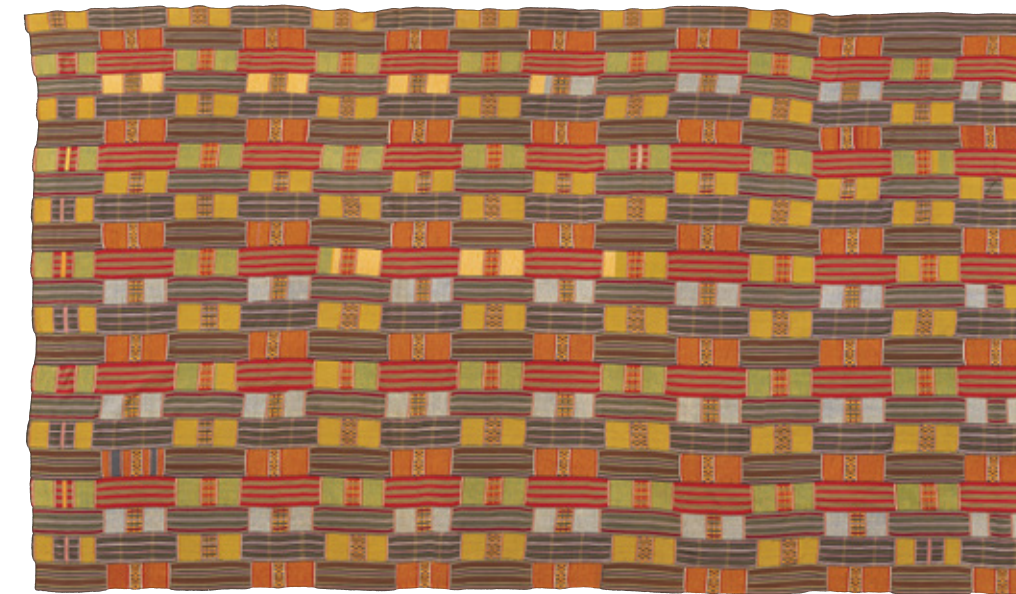
- How many differently patterned strips can you find in this cloth?
- Based on the width of the strips, can you tell where the weaver has chosen to use a tighter or looser weave structure?
- At first the cloth appears to have a very regular pattern. But is it as regular as it first appears? Follow the lines of the design and look for places where the weaver has changed or departed from the pattern.

Look Again

- What words would you use to describe the colors and patterns of this cloth?
- Now imagine what name you would give to this pattern. How does the name you have chosen relate to everything that you see when you look at the cloth?



Installation shot of *Creative Africa: Threads of Tradition*, showing a popular way men wear cloths. This poster's *Man's Cloth* can be seen behind the mannequin.



Man's Cloth

c. 1920–70

Strip-woven cotton plain weave (warp-faced and balanced) with continuous supplementary wefts and weft-faced rib weave

Size: 10 feet 8 1/2 inches × 6 feet 9 inches (326.4 × 205.7 cm)

Made by the Ewe or Adangme culture
Ghana or Togo

Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with funds contributed by donors to the Costume and Textiles Revolving Fund, 2001-170-3

About the Ewe Weaving Tradition

Though we do not know the identity of the person who made this cloth, there is much we know about the weaving tradition of the Ewe people. Colorful, geometrically patterned cloths like this one are most commonly known as kente (ken-tay) cloth. Produced by both the Ewe and Asante (ah-SHAHN-tee), these cloths are worn by men and women on special occasions. The Ewe people live in the present-day West African republics of Ghana, Togo, and Benin, and are well known throughout the region for the fine quality of their weavings. Men weave the cloths, while women spin and dye the cotton thread. Women are responsible for selling the cloths at market and often name them after the different patterns featured on the cloths. Unfortunately the name given to this particular example is not known. In the past fifty years, kente cloth patterns have become fashionable on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. While true kente cloths are hand-woven and made in Africa, mass-produced printed kente cloth patterns have become popular throughout the world.

The first step in weaving a cloth like this is to set up a loom. Ewe looms are simple, moveable devices that can be easily assembled and disassembled. To make the individual strips, the weaver must first lay out the lengthwise (warp) threads on the loom. Weavers then wind the different colored threads on to bobbins; this is usually done by children as young as five who are just learning to weave. The bobbins with different colored threads are then passed under and over the lengthwise threads of the warp, creating the desired pattern. In weaving, the thread that is pulled through the warp thread to create the woven pattern is called the weft.

Right: Ewe weavers in Ghana, 2008, photographs taken by Carol Ventura (www.carolventura.com)



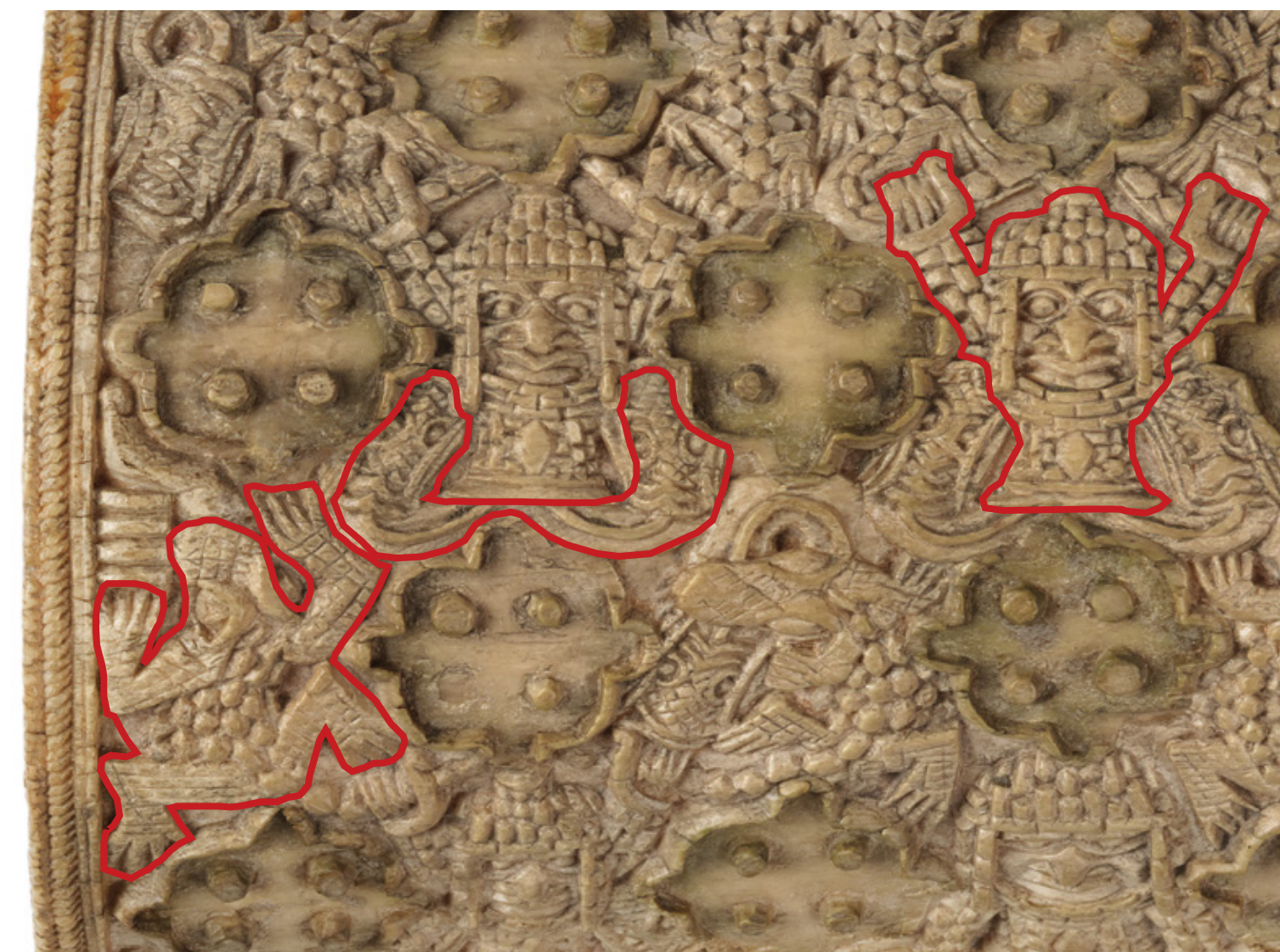
Compare and Connect

- What are some similarities and differences between the patterns featured on the carved ivory armband and the woven cotton cloth?
- How does the material and process used in the making of these patterned artworks influence the final designs that we see? Are there certain patterns that are better suited for the surface of a cylinder of ivory versus a two-dimensional woven cloth?
- What are some things that an artist can do when working with ivory that can't be done when working with textiles, and vice versa?

About the Artwork

This intricately carved armband was made for an Oba (king) of the Benin Kingdom and is an incredible example of the skill of ivory carvers of the 1500s. It was one of a pair that would have been worn on special occasions. Decorated with a repeating pattern of men with mudfish feet grabbing fierce crocodiles by the tails, the armband was originally adorned with metal decorations that fit into the rounded shield-like shapes that fall in between the figures; the metal decorations were held in place by the four raised ivory pegs that are still visible. In Benin, mudfish are a symbol of wealth and power and can be found decorating many royal objects. In this design, the strength and power of the Oba is symbolized by the men who dominate the powerful crocodiles. Ivory comes from the tusks of elephants and is soft enough to carve but is still very strong and long lasting. The curved cylindrical shape of this tusk influenced the carver's design and lent itself perfectly to making a bracelet. The carvings are deliberately shallow in an effort to minimize waste of such a precious material.

A treasured material both in Africa and throughout Europe, Obas amassed great wealth trading ivory with Europeans. In the Benin Kingdom the power of the Oba was expressed through his absolute control of this highly valued material. Benin artists carved ivory objects for sale to both Europeans and Africans alike. The ivory that remained in the kingdom was used in a number of different ways. Tusks were carved with decorative patterns and placed on altars in the royal palace, or were cut down into smaller pieces to be made into jewelry and objects that were used in religious rituals.



Armband

1500s

Ivory

Size: 5 1/16 × 3 5/8 × 3 9/16 inches (12.8 × 9.2 × 9 cm)

Made in the Benin Kingdom
Nigeria

Penn Museum, Philadelphia: Purchased from the estate of George Byron Gordon. Image courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image #6188

Look Closely

- Can you find the men, mudfish, and crocodiles in the pattern?
- How would you describe the shape in between the men and animals?

Look Again

- Follow the pattern of the mudfish, the men's arms, and the crocodiles. How does the pattern lead your eye around the armband?
- At first the carved decoration on the armband appears very regular. But is it as regular as it appears? Follow the pattern and look for places where the men, mudfish, and crocodiles are shown in different positions.

About the Benin Kingdom

The Benin Kingdom was a pre-colonial empire located in what is now southern Nigeria. The capital city was Edo, called Benin City today. Though little is known about the origins of this powerful kingdom, much is known about the period of political consolidation, wealth, and expansion of the 1400s. During this time Edo was fortified with an impressive network of walls and moats, and military campaigns rapidly expanded the kingdom. Benin became highly organized and powerful, and was admired by both European travelers and neighboring African nations for its art. The kingdom's wealth continued to grow through trade with the Portuguese and Dutch; common trade items included ivory and palm oil. Descendants of the Obas still occupy the throne in Benin City and serve an advisory role to the government to this day.

In the late 1800s, Great Britain attempted to convince the kingdom to sign a treaty that would have placed it under British rule. The Obas resisted signing such a treaty, and responded by capturing and killing eight British representatives. In 1897 the British retaliated with a devastating military raid known as the Benin Punitive Expedition, during which the entire city of Edo was razed and burned. Much of the kingdom's treasured art was destroyed and over 2,000 works of art were taken by the British and sold in Europe at auction. Today these works are in museums and collections around the world.