



# **The Poetics of Cloth**

**African Textiles /  
Recent Art**



GREY ART GALLERY • NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

# The Poetics of Cloth

## African Textiles / Recent Art



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Lynn Gumpert ■ John Picton ■ Doran H. Ross

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## GRUPE BOGOLAN KASOBANE

The six Malian artists of Groupe Bogolan Kasobane—Kandioura Coulibaly, Kletigui Dembele, Boubacar Doumbia, Souleymane Goro, Baba Keita, and Nene Thiam—are largely responsible for having elevated *bogolan*, a traditional textile technique used to decorate garments, to an important symbol of national and even pan-national identity. Although usually translated as “mud cloth,” *bogolan* actually refers to a clay slip with a high iron content that produces a black pigment when applied to handspun and handwoven cotton textiles.

The members of the group met as students at the Institut National des Arts in Bamako in the mid-1970s. At that time, *bogolan* was rarely seen in urban areas and was fabricated only by rural women. The study of *bogolan* was also strictly forbidden at the art academy. Coulibaly rallied five other like-minded artists who fought to employ it in their paintings as a way to reference their Malian heritage. The members of Groupe Bogolan Kasobane subsequently conducted in-depth research throughout Mali, living in villages for months and becoming integrated into the communities. From village practitioners, they learned the vocabulary of symbolic ideograms as well as the meanings of the traditional colors and patterns encoded in *bogolan*. Working collaboratively and developing new approaches to this centuries-old technique, they have continued to feature it in their art and award-winning costume and set designs for film and stage as well as fabrics for fashion and home furnishings. They, like other African artists and intellectuals, are part of a larger effort to uncover and reconstruct histories that were disrupted and erased by colonialism. Their insistence on using local resources and “elevating” materials associated with craft are strategies employed by many contemporary artists throughout the world.

The members of Groupe Bogolan Kasobane have adapted another Malian textile tradition that they call *gauffrage*, French for “waffling.” Inspired by the thick cotton hats worn by Malian hunters for protection from both physical and spiritual hazards, they fabricate works of art by sewing overall linear and geometric designs into double-layered cotton fabrics. The cloths are then stuffed to create a ribbed quiltlike effect. Not unlike hunters, who are sensitive to their environment as they search for food, medicines, and other community needs, Groupe Bogolan Kasobane continues its quest for intellectual and artistic ideals of beauty and cultural preservation.

J.G.

*Plantes du Jardin (Garden Plants)*,  
2003. Vegetable dye on cotton,  
69½ x 35½ in. Courtesy the artists



French government publication on youth and education and trained at the GRETA des Arts et du Spectacle, Paris, having graduated from l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, where she studied in the visual anthropology department. She is currently completing her M.A. at New York University's Program in Museum Studies.

#### **JANET GOLDNER**

Artist Janet Goldner has had more than twenty solo exhibitions and has participated in more than one hundred group exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad. Also active as a scholar and curator, she has organized exhibitions, published articles, and lectured widely. The recipient of numerous artist residencies, she has been awarded grants from the U.N. Special Committee Against Apartheid and the Ford Foundation, among others. She first traveled to West Africa in 1973 and has subsequently returned many times, especially to Bamako, and often for extended periods. Since receiving a Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship in 1995, she has been collaborating with Groupe Bogolan Kasobane and other Malian artists.

#### **LYNN GUMPERT**

Lynn Gumpert has been Director of the Grey Art Gallery, New York University's fine arts museum, since 1997. Previously, she worked as a writer, consultant, and independent curator, organizing shows in New York, Japan, and France. Among the more than thirty exhibitions she has overseen at the Grey are "The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984" and "Electrifying Art: Atsuko Tanaka, 1954-1968." From 1980 to 1988 she was Curator and Senior Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Ms. Gumpert also authored the first major monograph on French artist Christian Boltanski (Flammarion, 1992) and has contributed essays to numerous publications.

#### **JOHN PICTON**

John Picton is Emeritus Professor of African Art at the University of London and Professorial Research Associate in the Department of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies. He previously worked at the British Museum (1970-79) and for the Department of Antiquities (now the National Commission for Museums and Monuments) of the federal government of Nigeria (1961-70). His research and publication interests have included Yoruba and Edo (Benin) sculpture; masquerade; textile history; the interrelationship of traditions and practices in the Niger-Benue confluence region of Nigeria; and developments in sub-Saharan visual practice since the mid-nineteenth century. He received a Leadership Award in 2001 from the Arts Council of the African Studies Association and was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Pan-African Circle of Artists in 2002.