Cloth, Copyright, and Cultural Exchange: Textile Designs for Export to Africa at The National Archives of the UK

Julie Halls
Allison Martino

Abstract

Among around three million designs registered for copyright and held at The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, South West London—the archive of UK government records—are thousands of textile samples made for consumers in Africa. These are exceptional in that they include examples from the major UK manufacturers and merchants exporting to West Africa and East Africa from the late nineteenth century to the trade’s decline in the mid- to late twentieth century. Our research indicates that this is the most comprehensive public archive of such textiles in the world, and one that offers an extraordinary resource for researchers. In this article, we demonstrate how these textiles are material evidence of a hugely important trade that had an impact on life both in Africa and the UK.

The article discusses the historical context of these archived textiles and the characteristics that distinguish them from examples held in other collections and archives. Drawing upon a 2016 pilot project that assessed the scope and significance of these textile samples, the article evaluates their potential as a resource for design historians. The pilot began an ongoing research project that aims to produce a comprehensive study of factory-printed UK textiles exported to Africa.

Introduction: a ‘kente’ cloth’s global journey to West Africa

On a dark blue cloth, bands of thin white lines and rectangular sections of multi-coloured stripes and geometric shapes imbue the textile with communicative power
and transmit cultural meaning [1]. The pattern emulates Asante kente cloth from Ghana, one of the most prestigious African textiles. Since the seventeenth century, skilled Asante weavers have made silk or cotton kente on narrow-strip looms before sewing them into elaborate cloths, primarily worn as clothing. The colours and bold geometric patterns of hand-woven kente cloth evoke names and meanings, and these cloths serve as a mode of non-verbal communication. Historically, kente was royal regalia symbolic of wealth, power, and identity. Over time, the manufacture and use of kente evolved to become accepted dress for wealthy non-royals to wear as a wrapped cloth or sewn garment.

Fig 1. Factory-printed cloth with kente inspired pattern sample. Registered by Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale- Société Anonyme (a Société Anonyme organized under the laws of France) on 4 January 1954. BT52/6453/ 440916. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives’ Image Library
However, this particular cloth was not handmade in Africa, but factory-printed outside the continent and intended for the mass market. Production of textiles in the UK and Europe referencing *kente* cloths dates to at least the early twentieth century, and generated new audiences and contexts of use for *kente* distinct from those of the hand-woven cloth.\(^1\) In this example, the cloth’s design conjures the image of *kente* to consumers seeking an affordable alternative to the costly hand-woven cloth. In 1954, French firm Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale (CFAO) registered this textile design for copyright in the UK.\(^2\) The designer clearly referenced patterns common in hand-woven *kente* cloths, but modified the designs.\(^3\) Curiously, the cloth was not printed in France, nor England. In small white letters along the cloth’s edge are the words ‘MADE IN JAPAN’. The cloth’s connections with the UK, France, Japan, and Ghana indicate the vital role of cross-cultural exchanges to shape the design, production, and trade of factory-printed textiles appealing to consumers in Africa.

In 1957, three years after CFAO registered this design, Ghana gained political independence from Britain. Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, adopted *kente* as a symbol of Ghana to promote national identity, unity, and pride. CFAO’s production of this design likely came in response to the expanding role and increased demand for *kente* in Ghana. Since then, *kente* has become a leading signifier of African identity, including among African Americans and Africans living in the diaspora.

The CFAO textile sample—now deposited in The National Archives of the UK (TNA) in Kew, South West London—illustrates the complexity of this industry, particularly when dealing with textile firms that had networks spanning the UK, Europe, and Asia. In this article, we examine how the registered textile designs offer an exceptional resource for design historians to better understand the history and impact of this important industry. Historian Colleen Kriger says in her study of the history of textiles in West Africa: ‘Paying close attention to textiles—how people made, exchanged, and wore them—can offer fresh perspectives on the history of this region and also on the local, regional and global processes that shaped it’.\(^4\) The vast holdings at TNA of factory-made cloth samples for African markets present material evidence of a key aspect of this history. The registered textile designs offer scope to explore aspects of design, trade, colonial relations, and industrial and social histories of both Africa and the UK.

This article begins with a discussion of these textile samples in the context of the export of textiles from the UK to Africa. Next, we examine the historical and archival
The context of textiles held at TNA, including the debates around copyright that led to the establishment of the Designs Registry. The article then explores what makes these records of the textile industry different from those held in other archives and museums. Finally, we present the findings of a 2016 pilot research project that surveyed and assessed the significance of the registered textile designs for the African market held at TNA. They span a period of approximately one hundred years that includes the height of the UK textile trade in Africa, from the late nineteenth century to the mid- to late twentieth century. The pilot was the first step in a major ongoing research project of the textile industry between the UK and Africa. Placing these textile samples within the context of design and textile history, and of other collections, we show that the breadth and variety of examples held at TNA—little explored before—make it a resource of international and interdisciplinary significance.

The export of UK textiles to Africa

The export of cloth from the UK to Africa dates to at least the seventeenth century, when it was exchanged for goods or used as currency. In the eighteenth century, machine-made textiles, also known as ‘Manchester cloth’, were leading export commodities sold in Africa. During the mid-nineteenth century, the European textile trade in Africa changed. Dutch textile producers began making factory wax-print textiles that imitated and industrialized Indonesian batik techniques. When the Dutch failed to find a profitable market in Indonesia for their imitation batiks, they sent the patterned textiles to West Africa, where they became hugely popular. UK, Swiss, and French textile firms soon followed.

These brightly coloured patterned textiles—still ubiquitous in West African life today—became popularly known as ‘African wax-prints’. But what actually makes them ‘African’? These fabrics have garnered global appeal as markers of African identity despite their historical design and production outside of Africa. UK and European merchants worked to anticipate changing fashion trends and appeal to the diverse styles popular in various cultural groups. Designers in the UK and Europe first drew inspiration from handmade textiles brought home by merchants visiting Africa, and later travelled to Africa to conduct ‘market research’ first-hand. Designers modified the African patterns and incorporated European or Indonesian imagery into them. In much of historical and contemporary West African life, cloth has served as a central form of communication, wealth and self-fashioning. Once the imported
factory-printed textiles arrived in Africa, local sellers and customers gave them names with meanings essential to how they have become part of the fabric of daily life. The historical and contemporary manufacture and use of ‘African wax-prints’ thus reflect an important blending of European and African aesthetics.

TNA now holds the records of designs registered for copyright between 1839 and 1991, which include thousands of textile samples made for consumers in Africa. These records date from the late nineteenth century, when the UK export of factory-made textiles to West Africa grew as Britain became the dominant maritime trading force along its coast, and as methods of mass-production improved over time. These registered designs span nearly the entire period of this trade, until the mid- to late twentieth century when exports declined. The Archives contain a range of fabric samples from leading and lesser-known UK manufacturers exporting to both East Africa and West Africa, including machine-woven, wax-print, and fancy-print cloths. The enormous size and vast range of the registered design holdings make it the most comprehensive public archive worldwide of UK factory-printed textiles exported to Africa.

These archived textile designs tell an important story of African tastes and economic influence. John Picton, a historian of African art, notes that discussions of textiles imported from Europe in the late nineteenth century are often ‘inscribed within the European scramble for Africa’. In reality though, Picton argues, African patronage kept workers at firms such as Vlisco in the Netherlands and Arthur Brunnschweiler & Co (ABC Textiles) in England in employment, as African consumers played a determining role in the trade. The enormous range of designs held at TNA is testimony to the efforts UK designers and manufacturers made to appeal to the changing tastes of African consumers.

The textile samples at TNA form part of a dialogue between African consumers and European designers and manufacturers that continues in the present day. In M. Amah Edoh’s recent research on design practice at Vlisco, she suggests that designers followed a ‘good design ethos’, meaning attention to creativity, craftsmanship, and skill. She observed: ‘designers saw crafting the best designs possible as a mark of respect for their consumers, and consumers’ purchasing decisions were viewed as an important measure of their success. For the designers, good design carried the possibility of redrawing historical power relations between European and African actors’. Even though designers at Vlisco saw their practice as apolitical, Edoh argues that this design approach constitutes a political stance.
Registered designs at The National Archives: historical and archival context

TNA is home to these enormous holdings of designs as a result of the Designs Registration Act of 1839. Covering all areas of the decorative arts, this Act introduced registration of designs for copyright purposes; registration became a precondition for copyright protection. Subsequent acts extended and amended the legislation. The introduction of registration of designs was a key moment in design history: Brad Sherman and Lionel Bently describe it in their history of intellectual property law as the ‘first modern system of registration for intellectual property’.

The Copyright Act 1911, which came into force in 1912, introduced statutory copyright for all artistic works regardless of form. However, section 22 stated broadly that designs that were intended to be mass-produced should be registered. In practice, the protection from copying conferred by registering a design continued to be referred to in official documentation as copyright.

The registration process required the ‘proprietor’ to submit at least two identical drawings, photographs or samples of their design, described as ‘representations’, to the Designs Registry based at London’s Somerset House. The proprietor was the owner of the design—usually a manufacturer or retailer, but often a middle-man for exported textiles, sometimes known as a merchant converter. New rules were introduced periodically altering the number of representations required. Each representation was stamped with a registered design number. The proprietor and Registry each retained a copy of the representation. Registers were also kept, which recorded the registered design number, the name and address of the proprietor, the date of registration, and sometimes a brief description of the design. Because the Designs Registry was part of the Board of Trade, a UK government department, the registers and representations were accessioned by TNA, and are now public records.

Accessing the registered designs

In line with archival practice, TNA has retained the original arrangement of the registered design records from the Board of Trade. The complexity of this arrangement, in addition to current limitations in the online cataloguing, can make the records difficult for researchers to search and access (a situation TNA is looking to address). These challenges may have contributed to the lack of scholarly attention to the registered designs. The registers and representations are allocated separate records series. For example, records registered under the 1842
Ornamental Designs Act, which replaced the 1839 Act, are in BT 43 (representations) and BT 44 (registers). The registers and representations are also in different archival series according to the Acts under which the registration was made.\textsuperscript{12}

The arrangement of the designs varies depending on which records series they are in. From 1839 to the middle of 1909, the designs were pasted into enormous bound volumes. Between 1842 and 1883, they are arranged in ‘material classes’, such as earthenware, glass, metal, and wood, with fabrics forming a number of classifications of their own.\textsuperscript{13} The representations for this period are divided into separate volumes corresponding with their material class. The textiles designed for sale in Africa fall mainly within Class 10, ‘printed fabrics’. Around 875,000 samples of printed fabrics from 1839 to 1991 are held within the registered designs.

The records were also divided up differently with each new Act. From 1839 to 1842, the designs are divided into paper hangings and all other designs. From 1842 to 1883, the records are divided by material class. Designs registered between 1884 and 1908 (under the Patents, Designs and Trade Marks Act of 1883) are still pasted into large volumes, but under this Act, all decorative designs are amalgamated. For example, a single volume may contain furniture, ceramic designs, and textiles. The Patents and Designs Act of 1907 divided the records of designs into textile and non-textile designs. From 1909 onwards, textiles are stored loose in archival boxes rather than bound volumes, with each fabric sample stamped or labeled with a registered design number. The design samples for textiles intended for export to Africa are typically much larger than those made for the home market, and than those found in the pattern books of individual companies. In some cases, this larger fabric size is to accommodate larger repeat patterns. The 1907 Act stated that textile samples must be large enough to show the entire pattern and part of the repeat.

To find the registration details of a design, researchers must cross-reference the textile sample with the written text entries in the separate register using the date and registered design number. From 1839 to 1884, the register entries are searchable on The National Archives’ online catalogue, Discovery.\textsuperscript{14} After this date, researchers must refer to the original registers alongside the textile samples—a far more laborious and time-consuming process than searching online. However, despite these challenges, the registered designs are a rich and little studied resource that rewards the effort required to uncover alternative perspectives and new understandings of the UK textile and design history.
Copyright, originality and ownership

The registered textile designs intended for export to Africa are fertile ground for exploring debates around originality, ownership of designs, and authenticity. The concerns that led to demands for copyright of designs, and the debates this engendered, resonate with questions of ownership and originality in relation to designs made in Europe for export to Africa.

Heated debates took place in the run-up to the introduction of the 1839 and 1842 design copyright acts, when registration of designs was first introduced. Those involved in the textile trade argued over how to establish what constituted an original design—and whether originality was possible at all—how to distinguish inspiration from plagiarism, and whether in fact copying the work of others should be regarded as a problem in any case. Moral outrage was directed toward the ‘pirates’ who copied the designs of other manufacturers by those in favour of extensions to copyright legislation. The registered designs form part of a history of dispute and contention around the status of design in legislation, in which the same questions continue to be debated. The arguments surrounding intellectual property protection are international in scope within and beyond scholarship. Veronique Pouillard and Tereza Kuldova, for example, explore the ongoing debate that surrounds definitions of creativity and ownership, particularly in the context of the global exchange of fashion and design alongside a lack of harmonization of intellectual property legislation. Discussing the varying ‘zones of tolerance’ around copying designs—for example, distinctions between different forms of borrowing such as ‘close copying’ and ‘remixing’—they note: ‘These discussions, dating back to the nineteenth century, recur even today in successive waves within the media, typically when a new bill is discussed’. It seems to have been common practice for firms exporting textiles to Africa to copy handmade African designs, sometimes with minor variations. Charles Beving, described in the design registers as an ‘African merchant’, is one example. Beving was a partner in Blakeley and Beving, a Manchester-based company that copyrighted a large number of textile designs. Beving brought textile samples back to the UK from his visits to West Africa that informed patterns his company produced. His samples of handmade cloths from Africa are now held at the British Museum.

The history of one popular wax-print design—often referred to as ‘Flying Duck’—illustrates the complexity of establishing whether a design was original or copied, and who owned it. Blakeley and Beving registered the ‘Flying Duck’ design illustrated...
here in January 1914 [2]. However, the textile historian Ruth Nielsen acquired a sample of the same design from the collection of Brown Fleming. Ebenezer Brown Fleming was the first merchant to introduce Dutch- and British-made imitation batiks to West Africa. Nielsen dates the Brown Fleming sample to the 1880s, many years before Blakeley and Beving registered the design. The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) holds another sample of the same design, in a different colourway from the TNA sample, made by the Calico Printers Association (CPA) in 1959. ABC Textiles—acquired by the CPA in 1959 and now part of the Cha Group—still produces the design today. The registrations at TNA include similar designs with variations on the example illustrated here. As the multiple printings of ‘Flying Duck’ demonstrate, copyright of a design does not guarantee originality or mean that a single manufacturer is associated with it. Different proprietors produced the same design at different dates, and copyrighted designs that originated with a different company or designer.

Fig. 2. Factory-printed wax-print cloth sample. Registered by Blakeley and Beving on 9 January 1914. Copyright extended on 12 December 1918. BT 52/2987/99128. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives’ Image Library
Piracy of designs was a major concern for firms exporting textiles to Africa, and seems to have been commonplace.\textsuperscript{22} However, the many thousands of textiles at TNA are evidence that the copyright system acted as a deterrent, since the same firms continued to pay a fee to register their designs for many years. The copyrighting of designs yields information about practices within the textile industry—in particular, the importance of claiming ownership in a fast-changing and highly competitive market. The large number of registered designs for export to Africa reflects this intense competition.

More recently, Boatema Boateng has discussed efforts by the Ghanaian government since the 1970s to protect cultural works—characterized as folklore, or indigenous works—through intellectual property legislation, a complex undertaking that has had little success.\textsuperscript{23} Of particular concern have been machine-made cloths imported by Asian companies and made to look like \textit{adinkra} and \textit{kente} cloths. Made and worn among the Akan of Ghana since at least the early nineteenth century, \textit{adinkra} is a hand-printed cloth with graphic symbols that convey multiple meanings associated with Akan proverbs, historical narratives, social values, and moral beliefs.

Whether or not designs were made and copyrighted in the UK, European-made textiles were—and still are—assimilated into African cultures. Although detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this article, we highlight these issues as central to any discussion of textiles for export to Africa. Writing about the integration of imported wax-print fabrics into local structures of consumption in West Africa, Nina Sylvanus claims: ‘Imported objects are inserted into a local process and a set of practices of social reproduction and thus culturally assimilated by those who actually use them’.\textsuperscript{24} Amah Edoh also highlights the role of consumption in the production of value, with meaning-making practices key to the appropriation of Dutch wax-prints by West Africans.\textsuperscript{25} European production of wax-print cloth has been important historically, and in the present day, to the way some African consumers evaluate a cloth’s quality. Specific brands—European, African and Asian—may carry greater or lesser prestige.

The thousands of textile samples and registration records held at TNA can illuminate these intertwined histories between the UK, Europe, and Africa. They contain examples of many different designs, including motifs and symbols from various African cultures that UK and other European manufacturers adapted to appeal to their customers in Africa for over one hundred years. Our research into the registered designs contributes toward a greater understanding of the complex web of design, imitation, ownership and trade that formed this vital and evolving industry.
The textile trade over time: size and scope of TNA’s textile holdings

Several elements distinguish the textile holdings at TNA from examples held in other museums and archives. The most obvious feature of the textile records at TNA is their massive size and scope. No other UK public institution holds a comparable archive of factory-printed textiles for export to Africa and no comparable public archive exists in the Netherlands or Switzerland, despite their involvement in exporting textiles to Africa. ABC Textiles holds the largest private archive of such materials in England. It includes pattern books and other records from multiple textile firms located in the Manchester area that became associated with the Calico Printers Association and deposited their archives at Newton Bank Printworks in Hyde, England.

TNA holds over one million textile samples in total (including all textile classes), making it one of the largest archives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century UK textiles in the world. Valerie Mendes says the V&A ‘has the world’s greatest collection of British fabrics which illustrates in details the vicissitudes of style and shifts in taste post-1900’. There is some overlap in the respective holdings for this period, as a number of duplicate textile samples from a branch of the Designs Registry in Manchester were transferred from TNA to the V&A.

The scope, dates and remit of the textile collections held at the V&A differ enormously from those held at TNA. This difference is demonstrated in Nicola Stylianou’s history of the V&A’s collections of African textiles, in which she refers to a visit that V&A staff made to the firm J. A. Duke in 1947 to assess whether the museum should acquire any of its textiles. The correspondence reports: ‘Very large stock of machine-printed copies of native designs. Practically none are of any interest’. In the same year Peter Floud, then head of the V&A’s Department of Circulation, remarked following a visit to Logan Muckelt: ‘Machine-printed examples are of little interest. Hand-block-printed examples contain many excellent prints’. Possibly in part as a result of these assessments, the V&A holds relatively few machine-made textiles designed in the UK for export to Africa.

By contrast, what distinguishes the TNA textile design records from those in the V&A and most other museum collections is that the archived designs accumulated ‘organically’ as manufacturers and merchants submitted them for copyright. The design records at TNA have not been collected, preserved or curated on the basis of perceived cultural or historical significance. Therefore, they offer an insight into the textile industry, chronologically from week to week. A well-known textile design by a
named designer may have been pasted into a volume and unceremoniously stamped with a design number, alongside a low-cost fabric that has not been the subject of any historical or scholarly interest. Most of the designs registered are not high-end products, or by named designers. As David Greysmith remarks in his study of textile production in the mid-nineteenth century, these designs may therefore not interest collectors or connoisseurs. However, they give unique insights into everyday design and mass-market fabrics, and for this reason warrant much greater attention.

In addition to the enormous number of textile samples at TNA, the scope is also huge. Greysmith notes that The National Archives (then the Public Record Office) holds the largest single collection of UK mass-market fabrics, which make up the bulk of the textile trade. He says: ‘It provides an extensive (if necessarily qualified) picture of the industry, details of designs, and subsidiary information about changes in firms, titles and personnel as well as contemporary tastes’. This extensive range of examples from major as well as lesser-known manufacturers, and the detailed picture they offer of how firms operated and approached different markets within Africa, makes these textiles exceptional in terms of the scope for research.

By contrast, textile historian Philip Sykas remarks: ‘registered design material has been seen to document only a relatively few companies, rather than the mainstay of northern textile production’. In fact, many major companies are represented in the archives. Sykas writes: ‘Over half the calico print designs registered in 1845 came from only five companies’. However, in 1845, sixty-two different proprietors registered 6,490 designs in the classification for printed fabrics. Whilst clearly some proprietors registered many designs and others far fewer, those registering a small number of designs still warrant attention to better understand the dynamics of the textile industry.

The records held at TNA provide evidence of changing design trends, types of textiles, and technical developments—such as new dyes—that individual manufacturers introduced. They also allow researchers to compare production between different merchants and manufacturers. Pattern books of individual companies offer textile historians another primary source, although large numbers have not survived. Sykas says that pattern books ‘have proved a deceptively compact medium; a single book has often held a formidable body of evidence’. They contain valuable information, such as printings in multiple colourways and occasional handwritten notes of intended markets, pattern names, or designer names. Although the registers of designs rarely include designer names or intended
markets, they are an exceptional resource for researching the trade of UK textiles to Africa. The registers include a breadth of examples from different companies that reveal interactions between firms, such as how copyright changed hands.

In contrast to the partial or fragmentary nature of museum collections and pattern book archives, every registered textile design has been retained (although occasionally samples may not have survived). The registered designs are organized chronologically, rather than by merchant, manufacturer, or markets. Any single volume offers a fascinating snapshot of the UK textile industry—and wider socio-political and cultural life—at that time. However, not all textile firms and merchants in the UK registered their textile designs. As Greysmith notes, it is difficult to determine which companies did not register designs. He suggests this is in part because intermediaries—such as solicitors or agents, or Manchester or London offices—often registered designs. But the registered textiles allow researchers to contextualize a single design within activities of the wider industry, and thus bring together conversations about home and export markets that have largely remained separate in scholarship.

The printed textile holdings at TNA are extraordinary. But surprisingly, discussion of the registered designs has often been sidelined in related scholarship on the UK textile industry. Only a few studies have addressed the UK registered design records. Instead, scholars have often focused on museum collections, regional archives, and pattern book archives of individual textile firms. The marked absence of the registered designs in scholarship reveals a gap in our understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century UK textile history. Specific to ‘African wax-prints’, scholars have often examined issues of authenticity, cloth naming, and intellectual property, or discussed specific markets or textile companies in Africa. Yet no studies have consulted the registered designs. For example, TNA is absent in Nielsen’s seminal text on the history of ‘African wax-prints’ that presents the results of her research in the 1970s at three European textile firms and museum collections.

Other studies discuss specific textile companies or markets in Africa, with emphasis on the popular Dutch Vlisco. Little attention has been given to understanding how the industry as a whole took shape in the UK and evolved over time. The understudied registered designs thus offer design historians a broader perspective and an opportunity to gain new understandings about this important industry.
Histories of UK textiles exported to Africa in the registered designs

In 2016, we completed a pilot research project investigating textiles destined for Africa among the registered designs at TNA. With no prior inventory of these designs, our research yielded a clearer picture of the range and number of textiles exported from the UK to Africa. We documented 650 textile samples, which comprised a small percentage of all ‘printed fabrics’ registered designs (around 875,000) in the Archives. Of around 770,000 textiles registered in the ‘printed fabrics’ class from 1870–1970, we estimate that UK textile merchants and manufacturers registered between 50,000 and 100,000 textile designs specifically for African markets. Results from the pilot suggest that textile designs registered for African markets represent approximately 12% of all UK ‘printed fabrics’ designs registered for copyright from the 1890s to 1960s, reflecting the importance of the export trade within the textile industry as a whole.

Designing for consumers in West Africa and East Africa

For West African markets, the registered designs include extensive examples of wax-print and fancy-print textiles. Fancy-print cloths, which manufacturers developed after wax-print textiles, are usually more affordable than wax-prints and easily distinguished, with a design printed on one side of the cloth rather than on both sides. Fancy-print samples held at TNA include a multitude of design styles, such as lace and embroidery printing effects. The records also include machine-woven cloths that UK manufacturers made to resemble the designs of handwoven cloth in Africa, especially narrow-strip woven cloths common in parts of West Africa. For example, in 1911, Joseph Bridge and Company registered a red, yellow, and black machine-woven cloth that references the weaving style of Asante kente cloth (BT 52/2568/26841). In comparison to CFAO’s kente-inspired pattern, Joseph Bridge’s design gives attention to both the design and weaving technique of handmade kente cloth.

Textiles made for East African markets are also included among the registered designs—in particular printed cloths commonly known as kanga (called leso in parts of Kenya). For instance, in 1929, the Calico Printers Association (CPA) registered a design depicting a large red flower in the centre surrounded by four pairs of red flags inside a red and black geometric border [3]. Beneath the flower, an inscription in Swahili states, ‘hili ua la ajaibu’, which translates as ‘this wondrous flower’. CPA’s textile illustrates the format and design of kanga cloths, in which the combined image
and text offered the wearer an important form of non-verbal communication. The
design sample held at TNA is a full single panel. Printed on a thin cotton fabric, this
textile was possibly sold in a pair of two panels for women to wear as a wrapped
garment.

Fig. 3. Factory-printed *kanga* cloth pattern sample. Registered by The Calico Printers’ Association on 2 January 1929. BT 52/4059/270004. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives’ Image Library.

*Kanga* cloth use in East Africa (mainly Kenya and Tanzania) dates from the
nineteenth century to the present. Over time, the cloth’s production has included
sites in East Africa, India, Europe and the UK. During the pilot, most of the textile
samples for East African markets we encountered came from CPA and were
registered during the 1920s. Formed in 1899, CPA was an amalgamation of forty-
six print works and thirteen merchant businesses. Active in West Africa and the
home market in Britain, CPA demonstrates how the breadth of work within a single
textile firm came to span intercontinental trade in Africa.
Textile firms and merchants within and beyond the UK

The 650 textile samples that we researched during the pilot represented twenty-five merchants and manufacturers active in the textile trade in Africa. CPA, Joseph Bridge and Company, and the United Africa Company registered the most designs. Some of the twenty-five firms, such as F. Steiner and Company, John Holt and Company, James Hutton and Company, and F.W. Ashton and Company, participated in the home market in addition to the African market. Those best known in the UK textile trade in Africa, such as Brown Fleming, Blakeley and Beving and ABC Textiles, also registered designs for copyright. Moreover, our research identified samples from firms less often discussed in scholarship, including Edwards, Cunliffe and Company, Simpson and Godlee, and George Kay and Company. Yet their considerable representation in the registered designs attests to this specialized industry’s widespread activity in the UK. The range of proprietors included in the registered designs presents a rich picture of the industry, as their work spans distinctions in brand popularity, cloth quality, export market, and design style.

Interestingly, some non-UK firms registered designs in the UK. The presence of major European textile firms reveals a wider picture of the textile trade in Africa and demonstrates that the UK textile industry did not operate in isolation from production in Europe. For example, French companies Société Commerciale de l’Ouest Africain and Compagnie Francaise de l’Afrique Occidentale (CFAO) registered textiles designed for African markets at addresses in Paris and Marseille, France, and Manchester, England. Also included are samples from A.G. Leventis and Company, a firm incorporated under the laws of Gold Coast Colony (present-day Ghana), which included addresses in Accra, Gold Coast and Manchester, England.

Dutch Vlisco, the most prestigious brand of ‘African wax-prints’, also registered designs in the UK. For instance, in 1951, Vlisco registered an indigo-coloured textile design in a diamond-shaped pattern with small and large starbursts [4]. The cloth’s colour and patterning resembles indigo tie-and-dye and resist-dyed cloths handmade in West Africa, particularly in parts of Nigeria and Mali. A lush, heavy cloth with a glowing sheen, the cloth’s high quality stood out among other fabrics registered at that time for African markets. Today, Vlisco remains the most sought-after brand of ‘African wax-prints’. Vlisco’s continued success and popularity in the industry for over 170 years shows how consumers in Africa value particular brands with high quality cloths reflecting innovative new fashions and historical designs, including some that Vlisco now refers to as ‘classics’. 
Further research is needed to establish why non-UK firms registered textile patterns in the UK. CFAO, for example, may have bought textiles from Manchester companies and registered them to establish ownership before selling in Africa. Non-UK firms may have also sought protection due to market competition, since registering designs protected them from copying by competitors. For instance, our encounters with registered designs from Vlisco during the 1950s came in small batches of around five to ten designs. Selectivity of designs, as Vlisco presumably produced many more each year, may exemplify Vlisco’s in-demand patterns if registered due to competition. Although clearly not comprehensive in scope, the inclusion of European textile firms offers researchers some comparative views and contextual details about potential interactions between the UK and Europe.
Copyright extensions and changing design trends

The registered designs also offer rich insights into fashion trends and the popularity of textile designs. The written registers that accompany the fabric samples document if and when the proprietor submitted copyright extensions for a specific design. Under the Patents and Designs Act of 1907, the proprietor could extend copyright twice for a period of five years each time. For example, Vlisco submitted two extensions for copyright of the design discussed above—a copyright period of fifteen years in total. Long-term copyright suggests that the design was not a short-lived trend, but remained in demand. For designs with no copyright extension, the proprietor may have continued to print the design after copyright expired, but without copyright other merchants or firms could have used the same design. Copyright extensions thus suggest the popularity, exclusivity, or high demand of particular designs that led merchants or firms to retain ownership.

The chronological structure of the design records, as well as their comprehensive scope, offer historical evidence on the introduction of design trends. Since the early years of the trade, with many simple designs and indigo-coloured cloths, cloth patterns became more complex and colourful over time to reflect cultural and political changes. In addition to textile designers, market traders and cloth sellers in Africa have been instrumental in shaping new design fashions. In many areas in West Africa, for instance, women cloth sellers at market stalls overflowing with wax-print and fancy-print cloths have a strong feel for current fashion trends [5]. Additionally, women sellers have given names to imported textiles that make the cloths more culturally relevant and attractive for consumers, who dress in the cloths as wrapped styles or tailored garments. The registered textile designs thus illuminate how cloth has been an important material to negotiate a range of cultural, social, economic, and political relationships between the UK and Africa.

A design registered by Brown Fleming in 1913 illustrates the role of textile design as evidence of cultural exchange. The design is intriguing, raising questions about both the intended consumer and the meaning of the symbols that appear in yellow and white on a dark indigo ground [6]. The cloth depicts Arabic script and symbols historically used on West African textile designs, including the ‘Hands and Fingers’ design—an open palm with twelve coins—placed within ‘The Lamp’. Other less
common symbols included in this design may be associated with the ‘fraternal orders’ that became active across the British colonial territories in the nineteenth century, including the Freemasons, the Oddfellows and the Orange Order. Some symbols in this textile correspond with those used by the Oddfellows, a friendly society established in Ghana in 1879, and still active today. These include three links symbolizing friendship, love and truth that join two hearts, clasped hands, and the ‘eye of Providence’, representing the all-seeing eye of God, which carried an association with charity, and was common to other orders. The heart shape is often depicted within an open palm, but also appears in medals and other regalia. The textile may aim at a generic interpretation of fraternal symbolism in order to appeal to a wider audience.\footnote{84} It appears to be evidence of an exchange of ideas and symbols between the UK and Africa.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig5.jpg}
\caption{Market stall with displays of factory-printed cloths. 2012. Medina Market, Accra, Ghana. Photograph by Allison Martino. For permission to reuse, please contact Allison Martino.}
\end{figure}
In the early twentieth century, some textile designs blended British royal insignia with the Indonesian batik wax-print style, thereby spreading through cloth images and messages of Britain’s colonial power in West Africa. During World War II, the UK maintained production and export of textiles to West Africa, including ones with designs referencing the surrounding political context; cotton goods continued to be the single most important manufactured import of British West Africa. Textile design registrations continued throughout the war, often featuring V for Victory symbols, a hand making the victory sign, and patriotic slogans within wax-print and fancy-print designs. In the mid-twentieth century, designs continued to change. Some still represented colonial and missionary efforts during this time to create ‘modern’ African societies, while others reflected consumer aspirations to redefine themselves as cosmopolitan individuals through designs such as cars, records, clocks, and pool tables.

As West African countries began to gain independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, politically driven textile designs emerged to express and disseminate political agendas through cloth. For example, in 1959, the Calico Printers Association
registered a textile design illustrating themes of nationalism. The design depicts the Independence Arch, a landmark in the capital city of Accra, superimposed on a map of Ghana that was probably made using a photographic reproduction technique [7].

Fig. 7. Factory-printed cloth sample. Registered by The Calico Printers’ Association on 12 June 1959. BT 52/7285/474388. Reproduced with permission from The National Archives. For permission to reuse, please contact The National Archives’ Image Library

In addition, our research shed new light on the timing of design and manufacturing developments within the specialized industry of textiles for export to Africa. An example is commemorative portrait cloths that have carried immense social, cultural, and political importance for consumers in Africa. In 1908, two companies registered commemorative cloths on the same day. F.W. Grafton and Company registered a commemorative textile print of King Taki Tawia I (ruled 1862–1902), Ga mantse, ruler of the Ga cultural group in Accra, a major coastal city in the former Gold Coast. George Kay and Company also registered a commemorative cloth, depicting four
attendants and a seated man who may represent a leader from the Akan of Ghana or another cultural group in West Africa [8]. F.W. Grafton and George Kay registered these designs twenty years before the earliest documented example in scholarship: a 1928 commemorative cloth from the United Africa Company (UAC) of a woman market trader. Titled ‘Mammy’, Picton identified this textile in the Newton Bank Archives, which are now held at ABC Textiles’ archive in Hyde, England.51

Findings from the pilot project revealed that the registered textile designs at The National Archives tell an important story about this industry’s history not well recorded in other archives or collections. We conducted this pilot in preparation for a large-scale research project that traces the histories of cross-cultural textile design, production, and trade between the UK and Africa through the registered designs. The ongoing project aims to show how the registered textile designs reveal the ways merchants and manufacturers worked with customers in Africa and how textile design and fashion evolved within Africa over time.
Conclusion: contemporary significance of the registered designs

UK textile design and production for African markets has changed significantly since the industry began in the nineteenth century. Designers in the UK continued to introduce new patterns as consumers in Africa sought new, changing fashions. But during the mid to late twentieth century, UK textile production for West African markets declined as manufacture expanded in West Africa and Asia. As nations across West Africa gained political independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, new companies in West Africa began manufacturing their own textiles. In the late twentieth century, textile firms in Asia—particularly China and India—began to dominate the trade, which led manufacture to decline among African companies. Chinese companies are often central to current debates on copyrights for selling textiles printed with designs—and in some instances, also the brand name—from other textile firms.52

Today, ABC Textiles is the only UK firm active in the textile industry in Africa. They have continued to innovate their work to remain a sought-after brand. In 2005, ABC Textiles relocated production from England to Ghana, but maintained their design studio in Hyde, England. In Ghana, ABC Textiles now partners with Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL), a Ghanaian textile company established in 1967 and one of three leading Ghanaian textile firms active today.53 Both ABC Textiles and ATL Textiles are now part of the Cha Group, a major firm based in Hong Kong that is active in West Africa's textile industry.54 CFAO’s design registered for copyright in 1954, described in the introduction, exemplifies a type of textile pattern that remains popular in contemporary life. Today, ATL Textiles designs a line of various kente-inspired fancy-print cloths popular among many Ghanaian consumers.

In many parts of Africa, people have used factory-printed textiles made in the UK and elsewhere in Europe to convey messages, beliefs and status. Textiles have thus become an important record of social, cultural and political history. The registered designs at TNA offer important historical evidence on how UK designers, merchants, merchant converters, and manufacturers contributed to the textile industry and to the cultural meaning of factory-printed cloth in Africa both historically and in the present day. Spanning around one hundred years, TNA’s textiles designed for consumers in Africa are an extraordinary resource for design historians. They also illuminate the complexities of copyright, competition and cultural exchange across multiple continents and cultural groups, as well as providing evidence of business practices and the networks between companies. The vast scope, variety and number of
designs in this uncurated archive make them an important resource for research across academic disciplines.

Julie Halls has worked at The National Archives, Kew, for eight years and is their specialist in registered designs—that is, designs registered for copyright—of which there are around three million. She speaks and writes on various aspects of the designs, and her book about some of the more eccentric examples—Inventions that didn't change the world—was published by Thames and Hudson in 2014. She is currently focusing on a research project into textiles designed for the African market held at The National Archives.

Allison Martino is currently a PhD Candidate in the History of Art at the University of Michigan. Her PhD dissertation, ‘Stamping History: Stories of Social Change in Ghana’s Adinkra Cloth’, traces the cultural evolution of adinkra from its use in the early nineteenth century as an Akan royal cloth to its expanding roles today as a global icon of Africa. In 2016, Allison collaborated with The National Archives in Kew, England to complete a pilot project in preparation for an ongoing research project investigating textiles in the UK registered design archive exported to Africa.

If you have any comments to make in relation to this article, please go to the journal website on http://jdh.oxfordjournals.org and access this article. There is a facility on the site for sending e-mail responses to the editorial board and other readers.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the University of Michigan Department of the History of Art and University of Michigan African Studies Center for their generous support to fund the pilot research project. Thanks also to The National Archives of the UK for supporting and encouraging the pilot project and our ongoing research.
Notes


7 Ibid., 25.


10 Philip Sykas describes a merchant converter as ‘a company that purchased fabrics, and had them finished to their own designs and specifications. While it was possible for shippers to buy directly from mills, merchant converters provided their
specialist knowledge of design and production, as well as holding large stocks of unfinished cloth ready to be printed to a customer’s requirements’. Philip A. Sykas, *The Secret Life of Textiles: Six Pattern Book Archives in North West England* (Manchester: Bolton Museum, Art Gallery and Aquarium, 2005), 27.

11 TNA is currently working to improve accessibility, and plans to have a large section of designs searchable online by the end of 2018, with further improvements ongoing.


13 For a table showing the thirteen ‘material classes’ see J. Halls, ‘Questions of Attribution: Registered Designs at The National Archives’, *Journal of Design History* 26, no.4 (2013): 418.


20 Nielsen, 472.


22 F. Launert, 198.


25 M. Amah Edoh, 262.

26 Other notable collections of UK textiles designed for African markets include machine-woven strip cloths from Bolton Cotton and Bentinct Mills held at the Gallery of Costume in Manchester; Logan Muckelt & Co. pattern books held at Manchester Archives and Local Studies; Paterson Zochonis fabric samples at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester; fabric samples from firms affiliated with the Calico Printers Association at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester; Rachel-Kay Shuttleworth textile collection at Gawthorpe Hall in Lancashire.
27 Vlisco Textiles (P.F. Van Vlissingen and Company), founded in 1846, and one of the most prestigious brands of wax-print cloth, holds an extensive archive in Helmond, in the Netherlands.

28 Textile historian Philip Sykas has been working on an ongoing project to research and digitize the ABC Textile archive.


30 From 1908 to 1964 there was a branch of the Designs Registry in Manchester. Proprietors could register their designs either in London or Manchester. If they registered in Manchester, the regulations following the Patents and Designs Act 1907 required six samples to be submitted (TNA: BT 209/471); this was later reduced to four. TNA transferred duplicate samples to the V&A in 1979 and 2002 so that the Museum could enhance its textile collections. It is understood that the V&A selected examples which it wished to retain, rather than keeping all the duplicates: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/f/furniture,-textiles-and-fashion/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/f/furniture,-textiles-and-fashion/). Accessed 30 July 2017


32 Ibid., 267.

33 However, in addition to those textiles described by Stylianou, there are some examples featured in the V&A online collections database that reference registered design numbers, indicating that they are probably samples from the Manchester Designs Registry.


35 Ibid., 74.

37 Ibid., 166.

38 Ibid., 157


43 R. Nielsen, op. cit. When Nielsen wrote her study, only textiles designs registered between 1839 and 1910 had been accessioned by TNA. However, those in the series BT 50 and BT 52 contained a considerable number of examples of textiles for export to Africa.

44 During the pilot, we did not identify textiles designed for North Africa or Southern African markets. It is certainly possible that further investigation of the archive may reveal samples registered for these markets.

We identified fabric samples from these three firms that were registered in the 1950s, though it is possible that they also registered designs for copyright during other dates.


With thanks to Mark Dennis, Library and Museum of Freemasonry, for his observations.

F. Launert, 159–160.


For more on the impact from Chinese textile companies on the textile trade in Africa, see Nina Sylvanus, Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

The three main textile firms in Ghana today are ATL Textiles, Ghana Textile Printing (GTP), and Printex Textiles.

For more on the historical and contemporary relationships between textiles firms in Ghana, the UK, and Asia, see Linn Axelsson, ‘Making Borders: Engaging the Threat of Chinese Textiles in Ghana’ (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2012).