

Basel exhibition brings African chic to Switzerland

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Basel's Museum of Cultures is holding its first ever exhibition of West African clothing. Called "Boubou - c'est chic", it brings together some of the most impressive examples of African fashion design, with some garments dating back 400 years.

"Boubou" is a francophone word for the colourful West African robes worn by indigenous people across the region. The word itself is a French variation of "mbubb", meaning garment in the Malian language, Wolof.

A full Boubou consists of three pieces: a pair of trousers, a shirt, and the huge, wide robe with open sleeves and a collarless opening for the neck. Depending on the quality of the fabric, its embellishments and embroideries, a finished Boubou can cost up to SFr1000.

The Basel museum's Africa curator, Bernhard Gardi, has been fascinated with Boubous for more than a quarter of a century, and has amassed an impressive collection. The exhibition displays 30 of them, along with others borrowed from ethnological museums across the world.

Boubous reflect a rich cultural past, in which Islam and the trans-Saharan trade played an important role. Little is known of their origins, but Gardi thinks the ancient Malian cities along the Niger - Djenné and Timbuktu - played a crucial role in diffusing them across the region.

In the late 19th century, Damask cotton with its patterns woven into fabric became fashionable with Boubou dyers and tailors in West Africa. But because African weaving mills were not equipped to produce Damask, European exporters stepped in to fill the breach.

Many weaving mills, especially in Eastern Switzerland and in the Alsace region of France, were made rich by exporting to West Africa. Even today African traders visit European mills to discuss patterns with designers.

The Damask fabric is usually smuggled into West Africa, either through the Canary Islands, or by individual travellers and pilgrims who buy from large traders in London,

Paris and Mecca.

Despite losing much of the trade to cheap textile producers in Asia, cotton weavers in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe are still proud of their African connections.

"We were hit by the devaluation of the West African currency, the Franc CFA, in 1991," says Ulf Köppel who owns a Damask finishing plant in Lörrach near Basle. "Since then, the trade has picked up again. We selling 10,000 metres of Damask a day, or 20 per cent of our production, to Africa."

The monochromatic or white Damask fabric is exported in 15-metre lengths, which is what it takes to produce one Boubou. The dyeing, tailoring and embroidery is all done by small workshops in West Africa.

Boubous are worn by a cross-section of society, despite their cost. Many people can't afford them, but they are often acquired through ritual gestures.

At the end of the annual fasting period, for example, more affluent men would typically give their Boubou away to a poorer man, and buy themselves a new one. "This annual change-over is almost as important as the Boubou itself," says Boubou expert, Köppe. "With it, the owner tries to show outwardly that he is a changed man inwardly."

Visitors to the Basel exhibition who feel in need of a change, or who would simply like to own a Boubou themselves can order one. An African tailor at the show expects to do a roaring trade, particularly if it's a hot summer. His advice: "if you're tired of being hot and uncomfortable in western trousers or jeans, you'd do well get yourself a Boubou."

The exhibition "Boubou - c'est chic" runs until October 31 at the Museum of Cultures in Basel.

by Markus Haefliger

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