



THE WILL TO ADORN



AFRICAN AMERICAN
DIVERSITY, STYLE,
AND IDENTITY

By Diana Baird N'Diaye

In her 1934 essay, folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston noted that the “will to adorn” was one of the most important aspects of African American expressive culture. Although Hurston was speaking about the love of eloquent and richly embellished speech that she observed among African Americans in her own beloved community in Eatonville, Florida, she could well have been referring to the creative traditions of dress and body arts among people of African descent in the United States.

These traditions reveal continuities of ideas, values, skills, and knowledge rooted in the African continent and in the American experience. They have been shaped by identities born of African heritage; legacies of bondage and resistance; and encounters and alliances between people of African descent, indigenous Americans, Europeans, and more recent African and Caribbean diasporas. They may reflect, for example, shared experiences of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; group commitments to faith; and the politics of gender. The election of Barack Hussein Obama as President of the United States of America in 2008 and again in 2012 signaled a change, not only in the nation’s perception of its identity but also in the perception of who is African American. That the son of an African father and a European American mother, rather than the descendant of an African who survived the brutal system of captive labor in the United States, would become our first African-descended president expanded again the conception of what is “African American.”

A participant in the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign wears a T-shirt that serves as a platform for his message.
Photo by Diana Davies, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution



“African American style is as local as the barbershop on the corner and as global as the influence of hip hop dress culture among young people from Japan to South Africa.”

There has been a slow awakening to the implications of this cultural climate change in the demographics of the United States and a growing, if sometimes grudging, inclusiveness. Fordham University Professor Clara Rodríguez notes that “the earlier definition of an American, which was so prevalent in our media of the 1940s, '50s, '60s and to a certain extent the '70s, has given way to a definition that reflects the great diversity of America today.”

The Will to Adorn is, in part, a conversation about this same issue. As we find ourselves revisiting what an American is, we are asking ourselves and others to reconsider what it means to be “African American.” Communities of African descendants in the United States are diverse. African Americans have routinely been identified and discussed as an undifferentiated community, sharing one history and culture. After all, it is possible to identify in many expressions the influence of a common body of ancestral links as well as shared experiences of joy and pathos.

However, there is no one way to be “authentically” African American. African Americans “belong” to many communities variously defined by ethnic, class, gender and gender orientation, regional, religious, political, cultural, and other affiliations that exist in complex interrelationship with each other. Accordingly, there is no single African American aesthetic of dress; there are many aesthetics that at times overlap, intertwine, and are juxtaposed in visual dialogues defining difference and belonging.

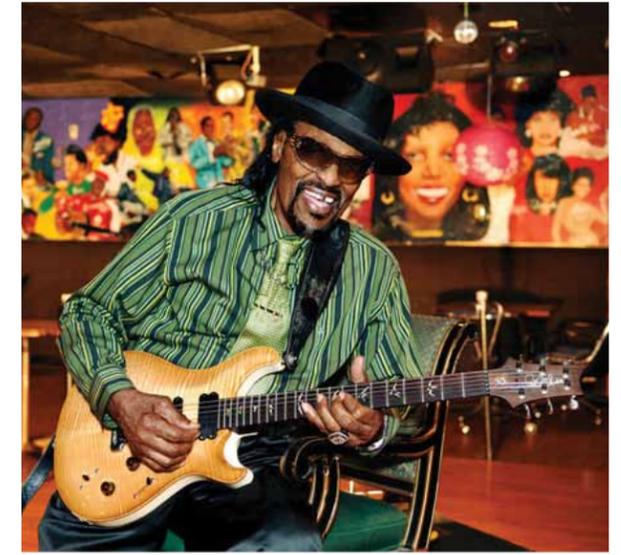
Style, the art of dress and personal adornment, is a powerful way to assert complex identities, announce solidarity with a cause, proclaim music and dance preferences, uphold cultural pride, and declare belief in a set of religious and moral principles. In all its glorious diversity, African American style is as local as the barbershop on the corner and as global as the influence of hip hop dress culture among young people from Japan to South Africa. At the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, we celebrate the communities, artisans, and exemplars of style who contribute to this distinctive, expressive art form and their creative approaches, processes, and performances.

LEFT Young men sport their Easter finery in Bronzeville, Chicago, April 1941. Photo by Russell Lee, courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-ppmsc-00256

RIGHT Handmade earrings sold at the 2009 Dance Africa celebration in Harlem, New York, celebrate newly inaugurated President Barack Obama. Photo by Jade D. Banks



The Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, produces an annual spring fashion show featuring millinery collections from members of the congregation. Photo by Sharon Farmer, courtesy of National Museum of African American History and Culture



The late Chuck Brown, a D.C.-area favorite, was known for his musicianship as well as his sense of style. Photo by Tom Pich

“If you’re a group, you want people to identify with you as such...it made an impact to see a group that was unified, that was dressed alike, that you knew that they were connected to each other.”

—Bishop Nkenge Abi, Church of the Black Madonna, Detroit, Michigan

“Man, [Chuck Brown] was cool, so you wanted to get some of his coolness.... He taught people to be yourself, that self expression is the key to loving who you are, to be who you are.... Now I don’t exactly dress like him, but his ability to beam his self confidence was attractive, so I wanted to feel the same way. It inspired me to try new things.”

—Concert-goers at a 2010 Chuck Brown concert

COMMUNITIES OF STYLE

A Community of Style is a group that shares a common style of dress that communicates a shared sense of identity understood within the group and learned informally. This identity is shaped by similar experiences, knowledge, dress practices, values and ideas about what is pleasing, appropriate or beautiful. Just as we may belong to many groups (or communities) including our families, our school buddies, groups with which we identify through ethnic or cultural background, we may belong to many communities of style.

EXEMPLARS OF STYLE

Exemplars of Style stand out as masters of the arts of dress and body arts. These individuals capture the essence of a community’s ideas of what it is to be well dressed through their artful assembly of hair, apparel, accessories, and body art. Exemplars of style acquire collections of items of dress and personal adornment from which they select to “curate” their personal appearance from myriad choices.



TOP Brenda Winstead is a self-taught clothing designer who uses hand-dyed and woven traditional African fabrics in her collection. Photo by Dr. Harold Anderson

MIDDLE Master barber Dennis "Denny Moe" Mitchell demonstrates hair cutting/sculpting on Edmond Asante. Photo by Jade D. Banks

BOTTOM Young people at the 2013 inauguration of President Obama creatively adorn themselves with campaign buttons. Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye

RIGHT The handle of an Afro comb manufactured in the 1970s carries political messages referring to Black Power and the Peace Movement. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution



"I didn't have a whole lot of money...I was in ROTC—and you know how they have the officer's ball and all that. I decided to cut my hair a little bit, and it came out pretty good. Everybody was asking me who cut my hair? I told them I did. A friend of mine said, 'If you can cut yours like that then you can cut mine better,' and I've been cutting ever since."

—Dennis "Denny Moe" Mitchell, Denny Moe's Superstar Barbershop, Harlem, New York City

ARTISANS OF STYLE

Artisans of Style are individuals who use their creativity, special skills, and knowledge of body arts and adornment to support the specialized needs and desires of clients who rely on them to achieve a style that fulfills a vision of their best selves.



Participants in the Dr. Beverly J. Robinson Community Folk Culture Internship Program at Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center in the Bronx, New York, interview master barber Dennis "Denny Moe" Mitchell. Photo by Jade D. Banks



Ronald Lewis (center) is the president of the Big Nine Social Aid & Pleasure Club, which shows off its fresh sense of style in New Orleans' Second Line parades throughout most of the year. Photo by Diana Briggs



Members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority in Washington, D.C. Photo by Ashley Matthews

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

The Will to Adorn Festival program is part of a multi-year collaborative cultural research and community engagement project initiated by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The project brings together faculty and students at historically (and predominantly) African American colleges and universities, museum and independent scholars, community and student researchers, educators, and cultural practitioners to document and present the wearable art traditions of African Americans from diverse regional, ethnic, occupational, faith, and ideology-based communities. This research has focused on urban style centers—Atlanta, metropolitan Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, St. Croix and St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and most recently Oakland, California. This project identifies and represents a range of traditions of dress and body arts of Americans of African descent across the United States.

A significant portion of this research has been made possible through the use of hand-held mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets for ethnographic fieldwork and oral history interviews, as well as documentation via professional still cameras, and audio and video recorders. Researchers share their fieldwork and reflections with one another through periodic online conference calls (via smartphone, tablet, and computer) as well as through a dedicated social media platform that works similarly to Facebook, developed specifically for the *Will to Adorn* project's multi-sited collaborative process. At the 2013 Festival, this work is highlighted at our Research Tent, where, as part of the Smithsonian's *Will to Adorn* Youth Access project, teen researchers work with visitors to create their own sartorial (dress) autobiographies.

Diana Baird N'Diaye is a folklife specialist, curator, and artisan of style. She developed and leads *The Will to Adorn: African American Diversity, Style, and Identity* Festival program, which is part of a pan-institutional, multi-sited research project. She has worked on many Festival programs, including *African Immigrant Folklife* (1997), *Bermuda Connections* (2001), and in 2010 she led the Smithsonian's support of Haitian traditional artists at the Festival.

Decked Out Accordingly: The Adornment of African American Women from Enslavement to the Mid-Twentieth Century

Adornment is part of the general language of dress. More than the obvious visual and aesthetic presentation, it is a symbolic platform for the expression of the personal and social self. Sometimes dramatic, it is just as likely to be a subtle and nuanced message that reflects and influences the wearer's mood or sense of self. African American women have adorned themselves through their clothing, hair, and accessories, in ways that have created status, respectability, power, and creative expression. They have used adornment to affirm their self-worth, to assert their identity, and to reinforce a sense of communal solidarity.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, dress was a contested issue that pushed Southerners to attempt to regulate the appearance of enslaved African Americans through laws. Generally known as *sumptuary laws* that applied broadly to everyone's personal spending, and moral and religious behaviors, Southerners placed specific limitations on Negroes. These codes restricted Black dress to coarse and inferior materials commonly called "Negro cloth" and prohibited African Americans from wearing "finer cloth." These ideas about distinguishing racial and class differences persisted through the end of slavery, even as Blacks continuously resisted and subverted the standards.

Not all enslaved people worked in the fields or in their owners' homes. During the antebellum period, some men and women produced and manufactured textiles and clothing. They participated in all aspects of production, from caring for the animals (sheep and cattle), cultivating the plants (flax, cotton, mulberry trees), collecting the dyestuff (indigo, bark, leaves, copper), and processing the materials into threads, cloth, and garments.

Highly skilled needleworkers were sometimes allowed to hire themselves out to make clothing for other plantation mistresses and to keep a portion of the wages. Elizabeth Keckley (ca. 1818–1907) was one of the better known seamstresses who used her earnings to purchase her freedom. She later established a successful dressmaking business in Washington, D.C., providing services to an elite White clientele that included Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln.



Elizabeth Keckley (1818–1907). Courtesy of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University



Ann Lowe (1898–1981), ca. 1955. Courtesy of Lenora Cole Alexander, photo by Conway Studio Incorp.

Lowe designed the wedding gown worn by Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy in 1953. Courtesy of John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

African American dressmakers, hairstylists, and fashion designers have been ground-breaking entrepreneurs who have used their skills to create sustaining, exemplary, and affirming work for themselves and their communities. Annie Turnbo Malone (1869–1957) made pioneering contributions to Black hair care and vocational education by a major manufacturing company and training school, PORO Hair and Toilet Preparations, which she established with monies from her highly successful dressmaking business. At one time, the business employed Madame C. J. Walker, who would eventually establish her own thriving hair care corporation.

Some of these stories and artifacts were preserved by the Black Fashion Museum (1979–2007), which was founded in New York by Lois Alexander Lane (1916–2007). Alexander Lane collected designs and creations of such noted designers as Ann Lowe and Zelda Wynn Valdes. She also collected a dress that seamstress Rosa Parks was working on at the time that she was involved in the Montgomery bus boycott. These items are now part of the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Historically, African American women have used dress and adornment to differentiate between *their place* and *their space*. *Their place* was the external social, political, racial, and gendered constructs imposed on them. They were bounded by the expectations of what they could and could not do, their stations in life, as well as their physical locales. *Their space* was what they created for themselves as producers (weavers, spinners, seamstresses, dyers, dressmakers, designers) and consumers of decorative arts.

Over time and across space, African American women have used the adornment of their bodies as an individual and collective canvas of cultural expression. They have created identities and beauty of their own making. Their clothing, hair, and accessories have served as concrete and visual representations of an emblematic statement to the world that their presence matters.

By Elaine Nichols

Senior curator of culture at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

FURTHER READING

- Barber, Elizabeth W. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Cunningham, Michael, and Craig Marberry. *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- Foster, Helen Bradley. *"New Raiments of Self": African American Clothing in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Berg, 1997.
- Griebel, Helen Bradley. "The West African Origin of the African-American Headwrap." In *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time*, edited by Joanne B. Eicher, 207–226. Oxford: Berg, 1995.
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present*. New York: Vintage, 1985.
- Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Preyer, Norris W. "The Historian, the Slave, and the Ante-Bellum Textile Industry." *Journal of Negro History* 46 (1961): 67–82.
- Reed Miller, Rosemary E. *The Threads of Time, The Fabric of History: Profiles of African American Dressmakers and Designers, 1850 to the Present*, 3rd ed. Washington, D.C.: Toast and Strawberries Press, 2007.
- Roach, Mary Ellen, and Joanne Bubolz Eicher. "The Language of Personal Adornment." In *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, edited by Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz, 7–21. New York: Mouton, 1979.
- Rooks, Noliwe M. *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Ross, Doran H. *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998.
- Shaw, Madelyn. "Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce and Industry." *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 33 (2012): 161–187, <http://www.mesdajournal.org/2012/slave-cloth-clothing-slaves-craftsmanship-commerce-industry> (accessed 2 April 2013).
- Sims, Lowery Stokes, and Leslie King-Hammond, eds. *The Global Africa Project*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2010.
- Tulloch, Carol, ed. *Black Style*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004.
- White, Shane, and Graham White. *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Willis, Deborah. *Posing Beauty: African American Images, from the 1890s to the Present*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.