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AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

THE WILL TO ADORN:

Reflections on African American Identity and the Aesthetics of Dress



Diana Baird N'Diaye

Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

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TO THE PUBLIC**

**WEDNESDAY
JANUARY 30, 2013
12:00 NOON - 1:00 PM
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101 INDEPENDENCE AVENUE, SE
WASHINGTON, DC**

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THE WILL TO ADORN: Reflections on African American Identity and the Aesthetics of Dress

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Everyday African American modes of dress are visual media that serve as a means of community self-naming. They mirror the complex and varied historically and culturally grounded social constructions of identities within the African American population of the United States. Exploring these identities in partnership with cultural practitioners can enhance our understanding of how “African American” identity is literally embodied in the United States.

There is no single “African American” community, but many communities defined by ethnic, class, gender, regional, religious, political, and cultural affiliations, which exist in complex interrelationship with each other within the African American population and in relation to the larger United States. In the same way, there is no single “African American” aesthetic of dress, but many aesthetics, which sometimes overlap, intertwine, and are juxtaposed in visual dialogues defining commonalities. Nevertheless, it seems there are very broadly defined shared aesthetic approaches to dress among African Americans, approaches which grow out of shared cultural experiences, traditions, and social histories. Some of these aesthetic approaches or inclinations may reflect African continuities; others are historically grounded, shared visual expressions of resistance or accommodation in response to oppression.

The Will to Adorn: African American Dress and the Aesthetics of Identity is a multi-disciplinary collaborative cultural documentation project that delves into the ways in which dress and body arts reflect the complex cultural, religious, ethnic, gender, and ideological diversity of African American identities within the United States. *The Will to Adorn* celebrates individual expression and creativity, but it focuses on the details of social dressing and the conventions that define what it means to be well dressed, or appropriately attired, in different African American communities against a backdrop of historical, cultural, and social change in the United States.

The Will to Adorn research project, which will also be a featured program at this summer's 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, is built upon long-term collaborations among scholars, educators, and cultural practitioners based in museums, universities, and community groups. It reflects how “African American” identity is literally embodied in the United States by examining a variety of topics, such as:

- The experiences and skills of a range of *artisans of style* (from hairstylists to milliners to tattoo artists) and *exemplars of style* (from musicians to athletes to actors)
- The diverse ways in which African Americans utilize dress and body arts to communicate cultural self-definition,

community affiliation, social protest, and religious and political beliefs and values

- The ways in which dress and adornment reflect the shifting nature of the interplay among race relations, immigration and migration patterns, popular culture, and the effects of globalization in the United States
- The powerful influences exerted by African American dress on style, in the United States and globally

Through these studies, the project has determined that:

- African American dress and body adornment are creative expressions grounded in the history of African-descended populations in the United States.
- African American dress and adornment reflect individual expression and creativity as well as shared group aesthetics and traditions.
- There are certain people, *artisans of style*, whose years of experience, artistry, and skills distinguish them as “masters” of their tradition/craft.
- Individuals learn and communicate their cultural definitions of themselves through observing and imitating the styles of dress of others in their communities.
- People's creative visual expressions of style in dress and adornment are “cultural markers” of affinity to these communities.

The populations and communities of African descendants in the United States are diverse. There is no one way to be “authentically” African American. African Americans “belong” to many communities, which 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. The challenge and goal of this ongoing project is to represent this complexity and diversity while highlighting those approaches, processes, and discrete elements of dress and adornment that grow out of shared or common cultural experiences, traditions, and social histories.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American Folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.

