

Bògòlanfini in Leather

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Bògòlanfini in Leather was inspired by the traditional art of bògòlanfini (mud cloth) which dates back hundreds of years and was first conceptualized and created by the Malian ethnic group Bamana or Mandé people. Since its creation, this cloth has extended in all West Africa, especially in Guinea and in Burkina Faso. These cloths are used by warriors as a camouflage and a badge of status. Women are wrapped in the cloth after their initiation into womanhood, as well as after they have given birth. The cloth is believed to have the power of warding off evil.

The bògòlan is a technique of textile dyeing which takes place in several stages. Before the dyeing process, preparation of the leaves and mud fermentation must take place at least a year in advance. The first step is to soak the fabric in a leaf concentrated substance (the Ngalama) rich in tannins and bark of trees (the Mpécou). This preliminary phase will create the ochre and maroon tones of the cloth. Then, the artist will draw patterns on the tissue with a reed called "calame" or a brush with earth of backwater (a kind of fermented mud sludge called bògò). The patterns drawn on the cloth (dyirabaw) with iron-rich muds are comprised of many symbolic images to represent life and nature. The individual images within the overall pattern of the fabric have specific names and meanings, and when grouped together the images will tell a story or tell of an event from the past. Third, the tannin is placed on the fabric outside the designs and produces a black tone when mixed with the muds. It will require at least 2 coats of the tannin plus soaking to create dark black color. Last, to obtain white tones on the bògòlan, the parts will be rubbed with soap; a combination of chlorine and washing powder.

The process of creating authentic bògòlanfini is a highly intricate affair, which is indigenous to Mali; therefore, my goal was to discover how to create a look similar with alternative media. I decided to make a cape using sleek, shiny black leather and rust and white suede pig skins as appliqués. I had never worked with these materials together and I knew I would be in for a challenge. Once I paired the materials with each other, it created a wonderfully rich texture that would make the finished garment very impactful. The contrasting colors of the rust with the black and white made a powerful design statement that is reminiscent of the bògòlanfini of Mali. The skirt paired with the cape was created of a cotton basket weave fabric to represent the hand woven element of authentic bògòlanfini, as well as to add visual and tactile texture of the design. I began the process by draping the silhouettes of the cape and skirt, purposefully creating the skirt with a very high waistline to balance the proportion of the high-low hem of the cape. Once the drape was final for the cape, I digitized the patterns into Optitex. The Optitex file was converted into an Illustrator file and I used the proportions of the garment to develop the layout of the applique design. The main body fabric was cut for the cape in sections

to accommodate the layout of the natural cowhide. Before the cape sections were sewn and topstitched, I applied the hand cut shapes of the pig skin onto the black leather with a single needle stitch set approximately 1/16" from the edge. I did not have access to a walking foot machine (which is ideal when sewing with leather), and I learned right away that using a roller foot on my machine was the only way to successfully sew the leather without bunching and bulging. Binder clips (you can't pin leather) and leather seaming tape were also very helpful in keeping the seams smoothly secured. When stitching the leather, it was very important to get the seam right the first time because leather is not very forgiving and will show holes from mistakes in the seaming. Once the lining was cut, I also appliquéd black leather strips onto the lower portion of the cape's lining to create unity in the design. The cape was sewn, then the lining was applied and both the lining and leather exterior layer were clean finished with a 1/2" binding along the neckline and the hem. The skirt was, cut, sewn and fully lined.

Bògòlanfini in Leather helps to bring a traditional art into contemporary times and honors the history of the age-old technique of using mud from our earth in design. This piece is a unique addition to my line of inquiry which consists of developing exhibition works based on Africa culture and fables. The work contributes to the field of apparel and textiles by bringing African based art to the forefront. It also contributes to the field at home sewing techniques needed to work with complex fabrics such as leather.

Date Completed: 5/20/2017

Measurements: Female medium (size 6-8)

References

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