

Authenticity is key when choosing African textiles

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Classic and timeless, authentic African textiles can add texture and interest to any decorating style.

Melvina Mency, owner of Anitavee's Home Decor, an online store for African-inspired home accents, said it is important to invest in genuine African fabric or quality fabrications. Otherwise, you risk having a style that looks cartoonish.

"Some of the stuff they sell in stores is poorly made," Mency said. "Some of it just looks cheap or cheesy for lack of a better word."

Perhaps the most replicated of the weaves is kente. It is readily available, especially in retail fabric stores. Real kente cloth is made from a silk and cotton weave. Brilliant threads of bright orange, blue, green and gold are woven into patterns worn by royalty and for special occasions.

Mud cloth, which has its origins in Mali, is a fabric dyed with fermented mud. The mud is collected from riverbeds and stored in clay jars for months. Artisans use the mud to paint various geometric designs on the fabric.

Kuba cloth is a woven raffia cloth made by people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Traditionally, men do the initial weaving and women embellish the cloth. It reportedly takes a month for a woman to complete a small square of Kuba embroidery, using a painstaking technique that includes repeated dyeing, needlework and tufting.

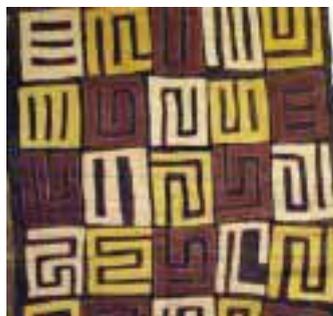
"Kuba is by far my favorite," said Jim Clemmer, whose wife, Esther Armstrong, owns Sankofa African Bazaar in Baltimore. Sankofa



This Shanon Munn-designed deck features an African inspired indoor-outdoor rug.

carries authentic African textiles, including various patterns of Kuba. "I love it. It's very abstract. It's just neat stuff. It's very different," Clemmer said.

Mency understands those who love authentic African design but desire modern color schemes. She began designing prints based on traditional African design so they could



Mud cloth, top, is a fabric dyed with fermented mud. Kuba cloth, bottom, is a woven raffia cloth made by people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

be replicated in any color.

"The problem with the real African cloth is sometimes those colors don't match up with today's colors," Mency said. "You have to follow the color forecasts because people want to match their accessories."

Big-box retailers such as West Elm, Crate & Barrel and World Market carry home accessories in replicas of these cloths. West Elm's embroidered hourglass pillow cover with a raised crewelwork pattern is a good example of a mass-marketed version of an African textile

Resources

- » anitaveetextile.com
- » sankofafricanbazaar.com
- » westelm.com
- » crateandbarrel.com
- » wisteria.com
- » ambidesignstudio.com



that captures the texture found in originals. West Elm's Kuba cloth-like pillow cover cost \$34. A real Kuba cloth pillow cost \$179 at Wisteria.com.

Real Kuba cloth is simply impractical for items like blankets. "You don't want Kuba cloth against your skin," Clemmer said. "It's raffia, so it's rough-edged. It's worse than linen in terms of texture. It's like burlap."

Mency said she recommends going with a quality fabric with embroidered or raised geometric patterns for bedding and coordinating that fabric with authentic African textiles.

Shanon Munn, of Ambi Design Studio in McLean, used a Kuba cloth-like indoor-outdoor rug to anchor a master bedroom balcony in the DC Design House.

"There are no rules. It's about expressing yourself," said Mency. "Try different patterns. See how it feels to you."

IN THE YARD

Coleus gives summer gardens an incredible pop of color without a flower in sight

By Joe Lamp'1
Scripps Howard News Service

When you think of the incredible colors of a summer garden you think flowers, right? But exuberant color doesn't always need dazzling flowers and shimmering summer sunshine. You can have displays of incredible color in lower light without a flower in sight, thanks to coleus.

Coleus is a member of the mint family, with its characteristic square stems and oppositely arranged leaves. It's actually a heat-loving herbaceous perennial, but is usually treated as an annual, since even the slightest breath of frost will turn it to mush. There are no USDA zones

warm enough to grow it through the winter consistently. In spring, when the soil temperature stays above 55 degrees F, it's time to plant in part-sun and well-drained soil.

The colorful leaves come in many shades of purple, red, orange, pink, green and yellow — just about every color except blue — in dozens of patterns, shapes and sizes, from tiny, spotted and marbled to gigantic, toothed, lobed and divided. They come in upright form, mounding, creeping and trailing. And while coleus can be over-wintered in pots in the house, the mature plants are more likely to bloom or harbor pests and diseases. It's better to take cuttings or buy new plants each spring.

Morning sun and afternoon shade is the rule of thumb for any coleus. But breeders have been introducing lots of sun-tolerant varieties that can take a lot more light than many of the older hybrids. Most have "solar" or "sun" in their names, and sport brighter reds and more vivid greens in their foliage. Coleus with variegated leaves of white, cream or yellow will turn green in too much sun.

Coleus likes even moisture best, but in shade will do better with drier soil. In full sun, be sure to give all coleus plenty of water. It may wilt in high heat, but will spring back quickly when given a drink. A 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch

over the soil will help retain much-needed moisture down by the roots. Even with its fabulous color, coleus doesn't need a lot of feeding. My plants stay looking great all season simply by planting in compost-rich soil.

Coleus grows quickly. When the plant is getting started, pinch the stems back by about one-third to keep them compact and full. Dead-head any flowers you see developing to keep the plant robust and growing strong. Grown outdoors, coleus is largely pest-free. Inside, keep an eye out for mealy bugs, spider mites and aphids. An occasional spray of insecticidal soap should keep them under control.



Coleus, a member of the mint family, has leaves that come in many colors such as purple, pink, orange and green.