

glass

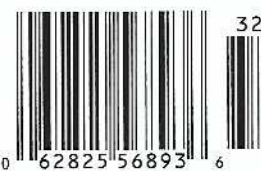
The UrbanGlass Art Quarterly

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COVER
Anthony Amoako-Attah:
Weaving Tradition
and Technology



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Display until September 30, 2023



No. 171. Summer 2023



“Look at the Glass, See My Culture”

Colorful kente patterns on glass are Ghanaian glass artist **Anthony Amoako-Attah**'s fusion of tradition and technologies as he probes the cultural significance of this special fabric.

BY EMMA PARK

OPPOSITE PAGE *Take me home III*,
2023. Screenprinted and kilnformed
glass. H 13 ½, W 11 ¼, D 5 ¾ in.

PHOTO: THE ARTIST

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE PROJECTS

As the use of glass as a medium for fine art has grown, new techniques have been developed to make it resemble materials with completely different qualities from its own—whether charred wood, like Karen Browning (see *Glass* #170, pgs. 52-53), or cake, like Sarah Brown (Hourglass, “Collect,” pg. 15). Glass is well suited to imitating fabrics, as demonstrated by the work of artists like Silvia Zimmerman, Malin Pierre, Karen LaMonte, and Kristiina Uslar, among others. When liquid, it can suggest woven fabric in its pliancy and softness; when solid, it can capture the fine-grained texture of fabric while at the same time contrasting the latter’s delicacy with its own rigidity and brittleness.

For his part, Anthony Amoako-Attah uses glass to imitate not only the texture but also the detailed patterns of kente—the cloth traditionally woven by men in Ghana’s Ashanti tribe, to which Amoako-Attah belongs, and which populates much of this country as well as parts of neighboring Ivory Coast and Togo. Born in 1989 in the gold-mining town of Obuasi, Amoako-Attah is an up-and-coming glass artist who has rapidly gained recognition in the last two years. Last year he won “Artist of the Fair” at London’s Collect art fair, and was awarded the Silver Award as well as second place in the Academic Award at the “Tg: Transitions in

Kiln-Glass” competition. For the last two years he has been represented at the Collect fair by Bullseye Projects, and he is also represented by Heller Gallery in New York.

Amoako-Attah’s latest series of works, *Take Me Home* (2022), consists of variations on the theme of the bag or suitcase made of glass.

The surfaces and handles of each piece are made in thin sheets of transparent glass, partly distorted to represent the way that kente cloth bulges and dents. Over the top there are kente patterns in orange, black, red, green, blue, yellow, and white fused glass. Of the three on display at Collect 2023, two were large holdalls with handles and a metal zip across the top, known as “Ghana Must Go” bags (on which more below), and one was a carry-on suitcase on wheels with a retractable metal handle, which, as he has demonstrated in an Instagram reel, can actually be rolled along.

His making technique was developed during his studies at Sunderland University’s department of glass at the National Glass Centre (NGC), where he is currently doing a Ph.D. His thesis, of which *Take Me Home* is the latest fruit, investigates ways of making glass that looks like woven fabric, and how it can be used to explore questions of cultural identity, migration, and integration.

He begins with photos of kente cloth taken by a friend back in Ghana, each bearing different designs. He replicates and manipulates the various patterns on the computer using a software program, and when he is happy with the final design, he prints it out and exposes it on a sheet of glass. He places a mesh over the screen and then pushes the frit through it onto the sheet before firing the result in the kiln to fuse the powder onto the surface. The effect of this process is to produce an uneven texture that evokes the warp and weft of cotton. After firing, he can heat up the patterned glass and bend it to suggest the movement of fabric—a stole or a towel—and waterjet-cut the edges to achieve a precise shape before cold-fusing the parts together. Characteristically for someone with a background in industrial design, he compares using a waterjet to being a tailor in the fashion industry, cutting cloth with a big machine.



Take me home II, 2022.
Screenprinted and kilnformed
glass. H 14 ¾, D 14 ¾, W 7 ¾ in.

PHOTO: THE ARTIST



Take me home IV (The Corner Stone I), 2023. Screenprinted and kilnformed glass. H 20 ½, W 11 ¼, D 6 ½ in.

PHOTO: THE ARTIST
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND BULLSEYE PROJECTS



Originally, kente was only worn by royal families, but this changed after Ghana achieved independence in 1957.



OPPOSITE PAGE *Myself*, 2020.
Screenprinted and kilnformed
glass. H 19 ¼, W 11 ½, D 2 ¾ in.
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

RIGHT *Take me home I*, 2022.
Screenprinted and kilnformed
glass. H 11, W 13, D 7 ½ in.
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

Amoako-Attah's first degree was in Industrial Art at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, where he majored in ceramics, making plates, lampshades, and other production objects. During his second year, the prospect was raised of a glassblowing unit, the first of its kind in Ghana, being established in the department, but "it never happened."

Nonetheless, he was intrigued by the idea of working in glass. Initially he toyed with the idea of recycling cut-offs from window glass, which would otherwise go to waste, into souvenirs that could be sold to tourists. However, because of the lack of opportunities to learn glass art in Ghana, he decided to go to Sunderland to study for an M.A. in glass. He spent a year there in 2015-16, initially focusing on kiln casting, which represented a natural progression from ceramics. He worked long hours at the hot shop, learning from technicians, lecturers, and fellow students. "Being there gave me the opportunity to understand the material, how it behaves, the qualities." He has been the first African student to pass through the M.A. and, from 2017, the Ph.D. program, which he is hoping to complete later this year. The fees for both courses were paid for by his father while Amoako-Attah covered his own living expenses. His father has been a "backbone," he says. "Without my dad, probably all these things would not be here."

To begin with, living in northern England was a culture shock. "Ghana is like an open space, a free world where you can meet and chat with anybody," he says. "England is like a closed circle. Sometimes, when you approach someone to talk to them, the person pushes back, moves back a bit before they will come to you." Sunderland is a deprived, largely white working-class city that voted for Brexit by a large majority in the 2016 referendum. As a Black person, Amoako-Attah initially found life there lonely and "a bit raw." His car was damaged in a racially motivated attack.

And then there was the weather. On his first day at the NGC in October, he did not leave until the evening. "Everything was so dark and freezing," he recalls. He found himself stranded at the bus stop without a smartphone and having forgotten the address of his lodgings; there were no buses around, and no one to ask how to find his way home. The experience inspired one of his earliest works in glass, *Transition I*, part of a series of flat or simply folded kente cloths which reflect his sense of dislocation.

The practice of making kente in Ghana goes back to the 18th century or earlier, when weavers used cotton that was either natural white or stained blue with a locally sourced dye that had been brought from Egypt along trade routes across the Sahara. New colors were introduced by the European powers as they

began to trade with and colonize West Africa. Originally, kente was only worn by royal families, but this changed after Ghana achieved independence in 1957. The first prime minister, the socialist and pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah, led the way by wearing traditional dress incorporating kente to symbolize his new Ghanaian identity. A bespoke pattern was named “Fathia fata Nkrumah” (“Fathia is a fitting wife for Nkrumah”) after his Egyptian wife; Amoako-Attah made a flat stole inspired by this design in 2021. Even now, he explains, while royal patterns can be used by anyone, normal people may not wear them in ceremonies in which the king of the clan is taking part.

In the past, kente, because it was so highly prized and expensive, was rarely bought for children. Instead, it was brought out on special occasions: for instance, says Amoako-Attah, at a graduation ceremony from senior high school, “your dad would give you his kente cloth to take pictures with, and then he would take it back.” These days it is still worn for rites of passage, such as naming ceremonies and weddings. “On the most joyful occasions, you see Ashantis adorning themselves with kente fabric.” When



The artist in the studio.
COURTESY: BULLSEYE PROJECT, PORTLAND

The Present, 2022. Screenprinted and kilnformed glass. H 35 ½, W 22 ¼, D 1 ½ in.

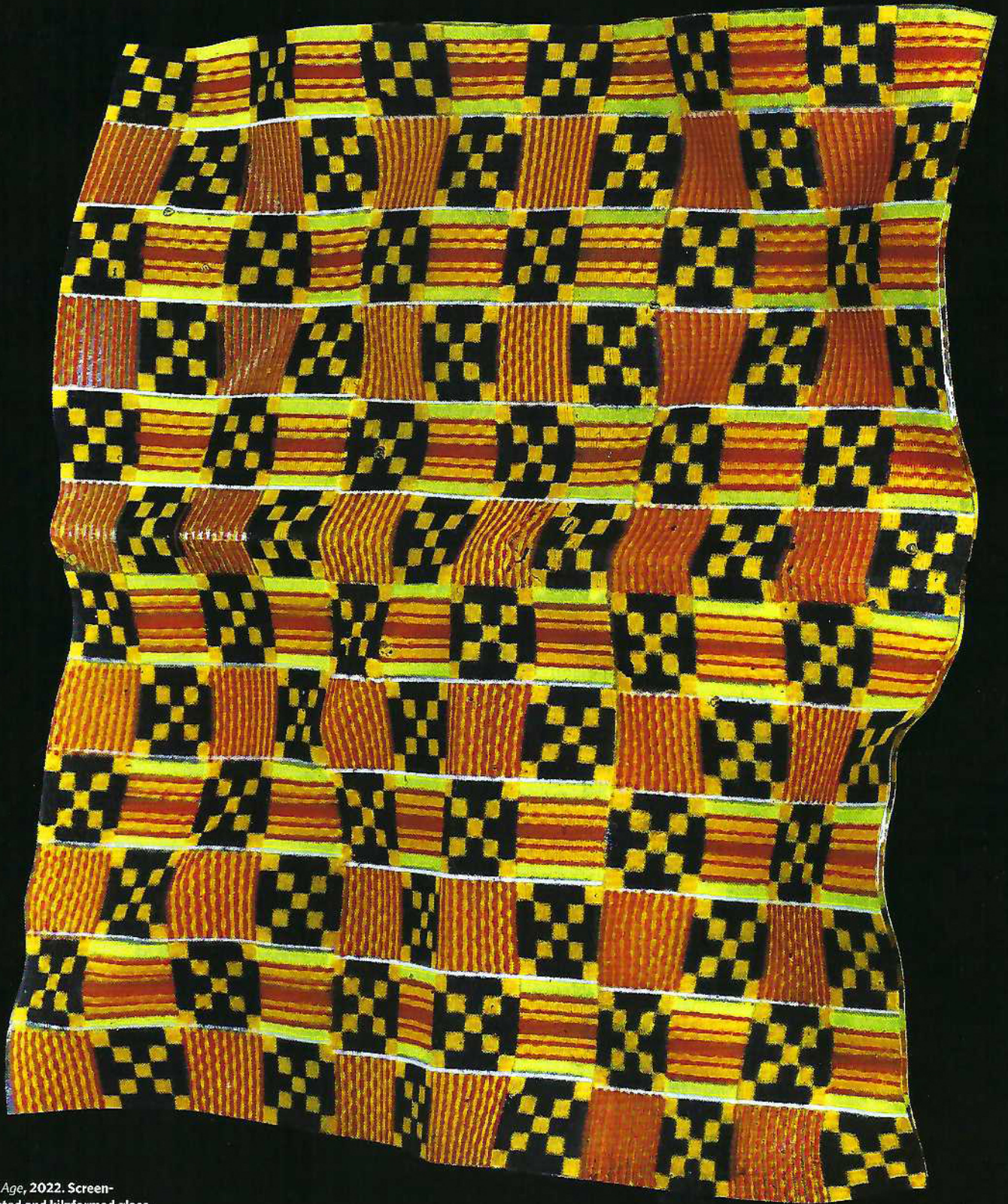
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK



not in use, they are carefully stored away in a bag in the cupboard. Kente is also a store of memories, whether for public figures like Fathia or private individuals. When Amoako-Attah’s grandmother died, his father commissioned a cloth with a collocation of patterns that was all her own. “So every time my dad picks that cloth, he will be able to tell his grandchildren, This is the fabric that I had made when your great-grandmother died.”

Kente was part of Amoako-Attah’s life from his childhood. His father was a civil engineer in the mining industry and his mother a trader who sold vegetables in the local market; he is the youngest of six siblings. At the age of 9 or 10, he performed in traditional dances with a kente sash tied around his waist as part of his school’s cultural program. “The designs are part of me,” he says. Art was also part of his life from an early age. At junior high school, he used to draw maps: “Ghana maps, Africa maps, all kinds of stuff.” Something of this early interest is perhaps reflected in the very fine and precise detail of the patterns on his glass.

In traditional Ghanaian society, it was the men who wove, while women made domestic pottery; the practice was handed down from father to son. “It was a taboo for a woman to get close to a weaving shed,” Amoako-Attah explains. “Kente was initially for the royals, and they do not like any kind of impurity, so when a



Old Age, 2022. Screen-printed and kilnformed glass.
H 22 3/4, 22 3/4, D 2 in.

PHOTO: MIKEY BARATTA
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK



*Birth, 2022. Screenprinted
and kilnformed glass.
H 22 3/4, W 22 3/4, D 2 in.
COURTESY: HILLER GALLERY*

lady was in her menstrual cycle, they saw her as impure. In indigenous culture, they still believe this.” In recent years, women have started to learn weaving at universities. But it is still widely considered “a man’s job,” he says. “All the beautiful cloth is woven by men.” It can also be “tedious,” involving as it does the painstaking interweaving of hundreds of individual threads.

In traditional Ashanti culture, kente was like an alphabet. “My grandmother would have been able to tell me history through fabric more than through books,” Amoako-Attah remembers. Each separate pattern and each color of thread has a name in his tribal language of Twi (pronounced *Chi*). At *Collect*, for instance, he shows me a pattern of black and red checks called, in English translation, “nine squares.” A zigzag pattern in two colors suggests the ups and downs of life: the changing “life chances” which he himself has experienced. “Every pattern has a meaning, and when you put the patterns together, it forms another meaning.”

Moreover, each of kente’s half dozen colors has its own connotations. Scarlet, says Amoako-Attah, symbolizes blood; black is “us”—the Ghanaians. A deep blue is “calmness,” pale green is “growth,” while bright yellow represents “gold, richness, royalty.” Orange “depends on the context.” He also incorporates “adinkra,” traditional Ghanaian ideograms representing concepts, into his artworks. One of these, a white symbol like a geometrical figure of crossing lizards, literally means “two crocodiles have one



Puberty, 2020.
Screenprinted and
kilnformed glass.
H 35 ½, W 19 ¾, D ¾ in.
PHOTO: THE ARTIST
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND
BULLSEYE PROJECTS

“My grandmother would have been able to tell me history through fabric more than through books,” Anthony Amoako-Attah remembers.



In addition to creating art, Anthony Amoako-Attah is passionate about communicating his love for his material through teaching.

stomach." In other words, he explains, in politics or the struggle for money, people often "have the same belly": they all want the same thing, and "you have to take your time."

Another ideogram that recalls a complex knot, added as a separate tag attached by a chain onto one of the holdalls, can be translated into English as "Accept God." "I come from a Christian background," he says, "I believe that, apart from God, nothing could harm me." The Catholic Church, the dominant religion in Ghana, has embraced the local culture, including *adinkra*: a Catholic priest, for instance, might wear a scarf with the "Accept God" ideogram. Other symbols might be found "at the house of a fetish priest [of the traditional religion] or at the king's palace." When the "Accept God" ideogram is applied to an object, even a utilitarian drinking cup, it gives that object greater value; in Amoako-Attah's sculptures, it adds a layer of personalization as well as an aesthetic contrast, in its two-dimensional curling figures, to the textured "weave" beneath.

Drawing together these connotations and the craft behind his glass cloths in "Take Me Home," his most recent series, Amoako-Attah has made three-dimensional and representational works involving a richer artistic conception. "The first few pieces were about exploring the method and how the method would work with his ideas, and now that's been maturing into a form that is both personally and politically relevant," says Michael Endo,

My Handkerchief IX, 2022.
Screenprinted and kilnformed
glass. H 13 ½, W 11, D 2 ¼ in. (each)
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



curatorial consultant at Bullseye Projects. Amoako-Attah attributes this intellectual development to the opportunities and teaching at Sunderland. “It opened me up when it comes to historical and contemporary precedents, knowing other artists, meeting other people, referencing other artists, what other people are doing.” Among influences, he is particularly drawn to those who have worked across cultures, such as Yinka Shonibare, a British Nigerian textile artist, and Magdalene Odundo, a British Kenyan ceramist, as well as Preston Singletary and his “inspirational” Ph.D. supervisor, Jeffrey Sarmiento.

A key motif for this series is the “Ghana Must Go” bag. The name refers to the deportation of about 2 million migrant workers, including a million Ghanaians, from Nigeria in 1983, when the larger nation’s economy had weakened after the oil boom of the 1970s. The flimsy but capacious bags, originally made in Asia with simple patterns woven in cheap nylon, took their name from the migrants who used them to carry their belongings.

For Amoako-Attah, the “Ghana Must Go” bag is a potent symbol that bears many nuances. After 1983, it became used in Ghana to store money in as well as food. As more Ghanaians traveled abroad, it was taken on airplanes, and was eventually banned by some airlines because of its tendency to split open and spill food everywhere. In 2007, it was even reproduced by Louis Vuitton, in perhaps questionable taste, in a luxury version emblazoned with

the designer’s stamp. Amoako-Attah sees the bag as a metaphor for even more fundamental vessels: “your mum’s womb is a bag, your stomach is a container”—as is the coffin. All of which culminates in his point that the container itself, not just the contents, is worth paying attention to.

In addition to creating art, Amoako-Attah is passionate about communicating his love for his material through teaching. He has become a respected member of Britain’s glassmaking community, leading seminars and exhibiting at the NGC (even if he has yet to find local gallery representation), and appearing on the BBC program *Songs of Praise* in March 2022. “Everything here is easily accessible—the materials, the equipment,” he says. “There is room for you to explore and improve yourself.” He has even “become used to the weather.”

For his next project, he plans to explore the creation of more complex, three-dimensional forms by wrapping his kente panels round a blown glass core. He is also experimenting with jewelry. After he finishes his thesis, he hopes to find a job that will combine teaching and art, wherever in the world that may be. “Where my legs can carry me, I’m ready to go.” With this sentiment, he seems to put a new and positive spin on his collection of glass bags—a reinterpretation in life of his own artwork. ■

Glass contributing editor EMMA PARK is a London-based arts writer.