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Gift of Dr. Peter Herschman, Textile Museum of Canada, *Habl a la française*

Dance of Pattern

Textile Museum of Canada 55 Centre Avenue
Toronto, Ontario, T: +416 599-5321 www.textilemuseum.com 28 September-25 June 2006

The Textile Museum of Canada may be modest in museum terms, but its curators have big ambitions. The collection consists mainly of hand-woven cloth in traditional styles from diverse cultures. This material provides its core displays, which are complemented by an adventurous programme of art textile exhibitions. *Dance of Pattern*, curated by Patricia Bentley, was the collections-based show running alongside Jennifer Angus' insect installation, *A Terrible Beauty* (reviewed in *Selvedge* issue 10) – an intelligent pairing, as both shows explore the cultural resonances of pattern design.

In the textile world we tend to take patterns for granted and rarely stop to ask why they look like they do. The starting point for this exhibition was the question, what is a pattern? It might sound simple, even banal, but the answer is harder to pin down than you might think. Bentley's initial definition – 'an element – a sound, an image or a movement – that is repeated according to a set of rules that govern proportion and juxtaposition' – sounds a little dry. But then she picks up and expands the musical analogy, bringing the concept alive. 'The basic pattern made by a visual motif,' she says, 'is like a melody that can be played in many different ways.' To illustrate this point, on display alongside the American quilts, Peruvian shawls and Indonesian ceremonial skirts was an intriguing device called a Music Animation Machine. Devised by Stephen Malinowski, a musician and inventor from Berkeley, California, it transforms music into colourful abstract animated patterns; chords swell and rhythms jump as you listen.

Bentley's passion for music cropped up repeatedly in the interpretative text. Indeed the title of the exhibition itself embodied her theory that the rhythmic qualities of pattern are analogous to a dance. Such thoughtfulness is rare in the museum world. Her personal insights – and indeed knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject – added to the impact of the exhibits. 'Why do humans create so many patterns?' she asks in the exhibition guide. 'All elements of the natural world are built on patterned structures, including the cells of our own bodies. We make patterns because we live in a world that is teeming with them,' she concludes.

Pattern design is a vast subject and Bentley was wise to limit her survey to the most common geometric motifs: stripes, diamonds, checkerboards and concentric patterns. Bringing together eclectic examples of each, from isolated parts of the globe, reinforced the universality of these archetypal patterns. Bentley explains that some weavers refer to checkerboard patterns as 'on opposites' because of what she calls their 'light-dark, half this - half that construction'. Particularly vibrant were the strip-woven cotton wrappers produced by the Asante people of Ghana, especially one in bright green with weft-faced sections and inlaid motifs in blue, yellow and purple. Known as 'liar's cloth', because the yellow threads running lengthwise through each strip change direction, such garments were worn by an Asantehene (king) when called upon to pass judgement in personal disputes.

Stories such as this provide an insight into the otherwise hidden meanings behind such textiles. While they can be enjoyed on a visual and tactile level, our appreciation is enhanced through understanding their symbolism and the mindset of the cultures who laboured so assiduously to create them. ●●● **Lesley Jackson**

05 Liar's Cloth, Ghana, Asante people, 1920-1950