On the southern edge of the Congolese rainforest, a remarkable kingdom flourished in the latter half of the second millennium. Known to their neighbors as “Kuba,” these “people of the king” developed one of the greatest civilizations in the history of the continent.

Art and design was central to life in the kingdom. In addition to developing an elaborate and varied masquerade tradition, Kuba men and women were prolific textile artists. Houses were woven, currency was embroidered, and an individual’s wealth and power were reflected in the intricacy of the designs sewn and dyed onto their clothing.

Like words on a page, these textiles tell the history of this empire in dazzling and eye-catching designs. As the kingdom grew richer and more powerful, the designs created by Kuba men and women became increasingly abstract. Works produced in the 18th and early 19th centuries are defined by repeating patterns and subtle details. By contrast, textiles created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are characterized by bold, inventive, and ever-changing designs.

This exhibition examines why these aesthetic changes occurred. Using state-of-the-art carbon dating analysis, it establishes a definitive timeline of Kuba artistic innovation. More importantly, it showcases how the increasing complexity of Kuba textile design was linked to the political and economic changes wrought by colonialism and globalized trade. This is not a story of victimization. Rather, this exhibition highlights how the Kuba elite used art and design as a political and diplomatic tool to reinforce their authority and navigate the increasingly complex world of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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Unless otherwise noted, the artworks in this exhibition are on loan from a private collection.
The creation of the finest textiles frequently involved the participation of an entire community. Men stripped palm fiber and wove the cloth. Women softened and added embroidery. Each year, villages throughout the kingdom were responsible for sending textiles to the court at Nsheng as tribute.

The Kuba Kingdom—roughly the size of New Jersey—was administered by a legion of elected and appointed officials, the most important of whom was the king (nyim). These individuals, identified by insignia and style of dress, oversaw tax collection, public works projects, and the administration of justice.