The textiles in this exhibition were created for aristocrats and would have been worn or displayed during the kingdom’s important ceremonies. Their rich colors and intricate designs convey the wealth and power of these high-status individuals, who were sometimes known as “people of the cloth” (*bambala*).

In the 19th century, the kingdom took control over the lucrative ivory and rubber trade. This meant that those in power could afford to commission increasingly intricate fabrics. Each pattern on these monumental underskirts was cut from a specially-made cloth and then sewn onto the undecorated base panels of the skirt. The growing color differentiation and geometric complexity of these designs reflect the financial ability of Kuba artists to create (and discard) giant swaths of purely decorative cloth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unidentified Kuba Artist</th>
<th>Unidentified Kuba Artist</th>
<th>Unidentified Kuba Artist</th>
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<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
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From the late 19th century forward, a textile’s beauty was determined by its pattern (bwiin). The more innovative or involved the design, the more beautiful the piece. As a result, artists spent a great deal of time inventing new and more intricate patterns. The prestige cloths to your right were created specifically to showcase imaginative, beautiful designs, and had no practical function beyond their aesthetic value.

When Europeans were permitted to enter the kingdom in the late 1880s, they quickly began to purchase and commission prestige cloths from Kuba artists. Eventually, these textiles made their way into museums and private collections across the Global North, where they inspired a generation of modern European artists. Indeed, Henri Matisse had several Kuba prestige cloths prominently displayed in his studio and wrote that “I never tire of looking at them… and waiting for something to come to me from the mystery of their instinctive geometry.”

1. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1962–1979

2. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1960s

3. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1959–1960

4. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1959–1960

5. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1958–1959

6. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1937–1950

7. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1962

8. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1902–1928

9. Unidentified Kuba Artist
   Prestige Cloth
   1812–1920
Kuba leaders used textile design to broadcast their authority to the kingdom’s 150,000 citizens. The Kuba king (nyim) commissioned fabrics with patterns that he alone could wear. In times of political crisis, when the authority of the court was threatened—by colonialism or internal rebellion, for instance—the king and aristocrats (kolm) wore textiles that visually signaled their power and authority to rule.

As the political landscape changed in the 19th century, members of the court no longer wore clothing with patterns that could only be seen at close range. Instead, they chose to wear costumes with large, eye-catching designs that were recognized from a distance and stood out in crowded state gatherings. By embracing an aesthetics of high visibility and making a grand display of the splendor, sophistication, and supremacy of the court, Kuba leaders reinforced their political standing with their citizens and Belgian colonizers alike.
UNIDENTIFIED KUBA ARTIST

Prestige Mat

1940s

There was a strict hierarchy of design in the Kuba Kingdom. In the capital of Nsheng, almost everything was decorated with geometric patterns—from the cups reserved for aristocrats (kolm) to the mats on which they sat. Of these nobles, only the most powerful and wealthy wore or displayed textiles with intricate and detailed patterns. Standardized patterns were reserved for lower-status objects or people of lesser rank. Meanwhile, outside of the capital, ordinary men and women wore plain, undecorated cloth. No person was permitted to wear Western-manufactured clothing per a royal edict that remained in place until the middle part of the 20th century.

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